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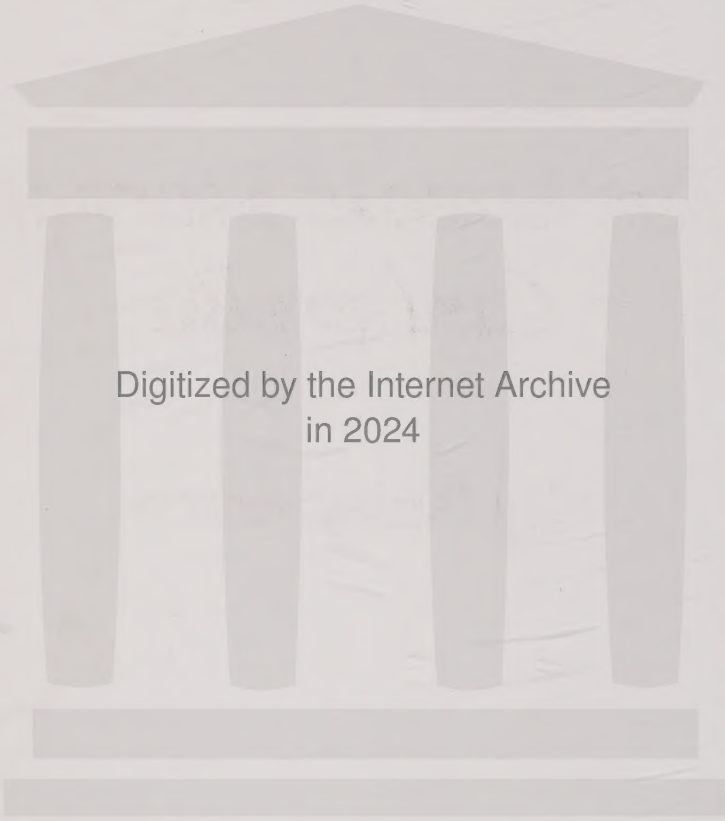
THE UNTOLD STORY OF CINDERELLA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Cinders

The Untold Story of Cinderella

By Finley Aaron

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To Eleanor, my daughter,
who does not give up,
who will find a way,
always.
You inspire me.

Prologue

Once upon a time, there was a girl named Cinderella.

Oh, you've heard this story before, have you?

What if I told you, everything you've heard before is wrong?

Oh, not *everything*, I suppose. Yes, I turned a pumpkin into a coach and mice into horses. The stroke of midnight, the glass slippers, searching for a girl whose foot fit the shoe…those were all part of the story.

And yet, the prince didn't just fall in love with Cinderella because she looked good at the ball. Pigeon feathers and pollywogs! Could you respect him if he did?

I most certainly could *not*.

No, no, there was vastly more that happened before the night of the ball, and a great deal of international intrigue after. Most importantly, there was more to Cinderella than humility, housework, and a pretty face.

If I'd have realized two centuries ago that people would still be telling Cinderella's story, I'd have corrected the Grimm version before it was even published—or better yet, told Charles Perrault to stop mooning over how Cinderella looked in her dress, and get his facts straight.

But I'm just a fairy godmother. I may be immortal, and I can sometimes work magic (not as often as I'd like), but I *can't* predict the future.

If I could, I'd have told the true story centuries ago, the *entire* story, complete with swords and Saracens, silk and spices, cinders and ashes.

All the parts all the other storytellers left out.

Yes, Cinderella won the hand of a prince, but she also saved the kingdom. In fact, if you think about it, she saved all of Europe!

Ah, but you can't appreciate all she did until you know the story.

So here it is.
Her story.
Cinderella's.

Chapter One

We've got to start in the beginning. No, not all the way back to when I became Fairy Godmother to the very first Eleanor, because that was even more centuries ago, Child. We'll start with Cinderella's mother, who very nearly wasn't a mother to anyone, and probably wouldn't have been Cinderella's mother if I hadn't intervened.

I'd been Fairy Godmother to them all, mother to daughter, on and on, for generations. They were all named Eleanor, but hardly any of them went by that name exactly. Cinderella's mother was known as Nora. She was the only daughter of her mother (called Nellie) and her father, a landowner.

Nora was an only child, and so, though tradition would have a son inherit her father's land, since she had no brothers, the entire estate would fall to her…once she married (that was the law back then. Balderdash and Gobbledygook! I don't approve—I know Nora could have run the estate perfectly fine on her own—but fairies aren't given much say in matters of inheritance law).

Nora had no interest in marrying, and her parents had long before given up trying to make her into the kind of lady who'd have suitors lining up for the honor of her hand.

She was lovely enough. Maybe not pretty in the conventional sense, but handsome and healthy. She was strong—quite strong. And bright. Oh, she had an intellect that could intimidate a man! Perhaps that was part of the problem.

Mostly, though, Nora loved horses. She loved to ride, to jump, to leap. She felt if she got going fast enough, it was almost as though she could fly.

It was through her love of horses that she finally found a husband. She'd gotten on to the age of twenty-nine years, which was far, far older than most girls were when they married in those days. Her parents were nearly desperate, because they knew they were getting on in age and, life-

expectancy being what it was then, they could die at any time.

They needed Nora to marry in order for the land to pass legally to her husband as heir. On top of that, they felt it would be nice to have grandchildren—another generation to inherit the estate someday. But of course, none of that would ever happen if Nora didn't find a husband.

And Nora understood. She had every intention of marrying, but she wasn't going to bind herself to someone she couldn't stand.

I understood, too.

And being a fairy, I was able to give fate a little nudge.

There was a merchant by the name of Robert. He traded in silks and spices, mostly—imports from the east, of course. But there was a drought in Arabia that had lasted for three years by that time, and as Robert passed near that region on his way back from India with a caravan of imports, he heard stories of the fine Arabian horses who were near to starving for a lack of grass (the drought having dried up the pastures, you understand).

Robert went far out of his way to inquire further, and learned that some of the sheiks, who under normal circumstances would *never* sell their horses to an outsider (they considered the horses part of their family), were willing to sell horses to those on their way to richer pastures, if it meant the animals might survive.

Selling horses meant those animals who remained would have a greater share of the meager remaining grass, too. It wasn't an easy decision for the sheiks, and some would rather see their horses dead than sold to an outsider, but there were those willing to make a trade for the sake of the lives of the animals.

And so Robert, being a savvy merchant with an eye for profit, and also a horseman of some skill himself, who appreciated the quality of the animals offered for sale, made trade for six horses, all of them so close to the brink of death, they had to ride in wagons until they reached grazing land further north (he'd have traded for more horses if he could have

come up with more wagons—I don't doubt that).

It was slow going, especially at first. But with great care and attention, the animals regained a bit of their strength, enough for Robert to lead them slowly along the journey, stopping often to rest, and for food and water.

So it was that he came along the road that led by the Caprese estate, moving at a very modest pace to avoid taxing the animals who were still regaining their strength.

Nora had been out for her morning ride in the cool of the day. She rode the many paths that laced through the woods of their estate, and was headed back to the stables at the time. She would never have gone near the road if I hadn't prompted her.

Now, you've got to understand a few things about fairies. We don't just stay one size all the time. I personally prefer to shrink down to the size of a dust mote unless there's some reason for me to be bigger. With Nora, I could often be found fluttering near her ears, where she could hear me no matter how tiny I was, and where I'd be out of sight to most people—if they saw me at all, I'd appear as little more than a twinkle in Nora's eyes.

But since she was out riding at the time, and since she loved to ride fast, and to leap over fences and walls and fallen logs as though the woods were her own private steeplechase course, I tended to stay out of her way.

Safety, you understand. Fairies can only live forever if they don't get killed, and what use would I be to anyone flattened like a bug?

Most often I'd flutter high, as high as the treetops or a little above them, where I could keep an eye on Nora (that being my godmotherly duty) and where I'd be out of the range of getting slapped by tree branches or smacked by her sudden leaping.

So it was that I was hovering just above the woods when I spotted Robert on his slow procession along the road that led past Caprese.

Another thing you've got to understand about Fairy Godmothers: we're more intuitive than humans. That is to say, we have a few more senses at our disposal, and centuries more

life experience to draw from, and we're able to understand a great deal about situations from just a glance.

Ironically, this very trait is to blame for our reputation of being rattle-brained dingbat ninnies. All that intuiting sometimes distracts us from what you humans see, by which I mean, we don't always notice the obvious (at least what is obvious from your perspective).

But in the case of that morning, when I spotted Robert and his Arabian horses making their way gently down the road past Caprese, I intuited several very accurate things. I immediately gathered that the horses had come from Arabia, which I knew to be locked in drought, and I understood that Robert had saved them.

This told me a great deal about his character. Most importantly, I knew he valued horses. But more than that, I understood that he was a caring man, who'd risked whatever profits he might otherwise have made, by taking the time to try to save these horses.

And when I looked at his ring finger, I ascertained that he was single, too.

So in a twinkling (and in far less time than it takes to explain it to you), I knew everything I needed to know about Robert, and I surmised one thing more besides: that he would be the perfect solution to Nora's problem, and a far better husband for her than even I had hoped she could find.

I flew at top speed back to Nora, grew to the size of an apple, and fluttered in front of her face, shouting that I needed her to ride urgently after me.

Since I very rarely ever flew into such a fit, Nora understood it was important, and came after me as quickly as her horse would carry her. She jumped the wall that divided the estate from the road, landing just a stone's throw ahead of Robert's traveling party.

From that moment on, I didn't have to do or say anything. Nora spotted the horses and immediately fell in love (with the horses—it took a bit longer between her and Robert).

At the same time, Robert saw this lovely young woman

gracefully leap the wall. Nora always had the most elegant riding posture. She was just flexible enough to move with her mount, but she never slouched and always kept her head high, her eyes ahead.

She was, in a word, stunning.

Robert looked at her, and all the tiredness he'd felt in his long journey fell away. He stood taller—encouraged. Invigorated. Interested in Nora and in making the best possible first impression.

Nora approached on her horse, coming to within spitting distance of the first animal before she stopped, giving the horses plenty of room so none of them would spook.

By way of greeting, she said one word. "Arabians." Her voice held awe but also grave concern. She dismounted quickly, walking towards the mare nearest to her. "These animals have been underfed." Her tone held accusation, even anger. If she'd heard of the drought in Arabia, she'd momentarily forgotten about it in her overwhelming concern for the horses.

I could hear the undercurrent of fury in her voice, but Robert, being unfamiliar with Nora, and still awed by her sudden leap over the wall, was oblivious to the protective instinct that was rising within her at the sight of the once-starved animals.

"You should have seen them six weeks ago," Robert noted with a chuckle. "They were half dead. They've come a long way since then."

"Come a long way?" Nora asked, not the slightest bit appeased.

"Yes, I've brought them all the way from Arabia."

"You've brought them from Arabia? And run them half-dead?"

By this time, Robert had begun to realize that Nora wasn't nearly as enamored with him as he was with her. I was perched on her shoulder, trying frantically to explain the real truth, but she was wholly consumed by concern for the horses.

"When did they last water?" Nora asked.

"At the stream by the covered bridge."

Nora, of course, knew the spot, and felt it was too far for the horses to have come without watering again, especially given their condition. "They need water. There's not another stream for three furlongs. They can drink at my fountain. Follow me."

With that, Nora led her horse and Robert's party around to the front gate, and from there to the fountain, which spilled water into a large quatrefoil-shaped trough.

Robert had by this time realized that Nora blamed him for the poor condition of the horses, and was frantically trying to think of a way to explain the situation in a way that wouldn't make matters worse.

"Thank you, my lady, for allowing us to drink here. I've been looking for a place to water, but this road is one unfamiliar to me—"

"Why would you travel an unfamiliar path and put your animals at risk? This seems highly irresponsible, even foolhardy—"

"I hadn't expected to travel with weak horses at all, when I set out. Arabia's in a drought. These horses you see here would have been dead more than a month ago if I hadn't brought them out of Arabia. Now I've lost six weeks and gone off my usual route, because the main highway, as you might know it, sees too many travelers, and there is too much competition for grazing land along that route. I took a side route hoping to find better grazing, and I'd thought, understanding landowners along the way." Robert said all this in a rush, because he'd noticed Nora's tendency to cut in when she got the chance, and he wanted to have everything said before she had an opportunity to turn his words back upon him.

For her part, Nora realized the mistake she'd made, and felt chastised. She'd been petting the horses, checking them over for signs of health or abuse, and could see that, other than being of low weight, they appeared otherwise to have been carefully cared for. "You saved them from starvation?" Her voice was deeper, softer, and had lost the shrill note of defense.

Robert relaxed at her tone. "I'd have taken more, if I'd thought I could have transported them. They're in a bad way in Arabia. Horses are dying of starvation there."

"What are your plans for them? You're a merchant?"

"Yes, I'm a merchant of the bourgeois class, a resident of the city of Charmont. Usually I trade in silk and spices, but I traded most of what I'd brought from India to the sheik who sold me the horses. I don't honestly know what I'm going to do with them. They're not draft horses—they're not built for pulling wagons of goods from India. I just knew they were beautiful animals, and I couldn't stand to watch them die."

"You don't know what you're going to do with them?" Nora asked as she stroked the mane of the dappled gray nearest her. She felt frustrated, not just that the horses had been through such hardship, but that this merchant had bought them without a plan for their care. This seemed irresponsible, even reckless, to her mind.

And though she wouldn't admit it, she felt irked that she might have misjudged the man—but she wasn't about to apologize. If anything, she felt she ought to point out the faults in his lack of planning, as though doing so might justify her earlier anger.

She purposely tried to ignore the fact that the man was a resident of the king's city, and a member of the bourgeois class, as well (which meant that he, though a city dweller and not a landowner himself, was nonetheless of an appropriate life station that, were he to marry a landowner's daughter such as herself, he could inherit the land, which would then pass on to his children without any legal problems whatsoever, seeing that he had no estate for hers to entangle with).

Nora was, as I said, upset, and if you want the full truth, the fact that the man in front of her could theoretically solve her problems and inherit her estate, annoyed her almost as much as the condition of his horses.

"Well," she continued, "you won't help matters by continuing on this death march across Europe. These animals need rest, and I daresay you need to get on with your business."

Robert's mouth gaped open at her words, and I was buzzing frantically at her ear, not that she would listen to me once she got going like that. I'd found one man in all the world who might make her a fitting husband, and she preferred to run him off. Being a fairy, I couldn't very well show myself, since it's a part of the fairy honor code never to appear to anyone save your own godchild and their closest, most immediate friends and family (which Robert would never become at the rate we were going).

So Nora was on her own, and she seemed intent on chasing Robert away without ever giving him a chance.

Chapter Two

"You say I should get on with my business," Robert repeated in a challenging tone. "And yet, you insist these horses need to rest. Well, which is it?"

"You, go." Nora waved her hand at him as though dismissing a servant who hadn't had the sense to realize the time for exit had come and passed. "Leave the horses here to rest."

"Leave the horses—you mean, you want to buy them from me?"

"I was thinking perhaps we could work out an agreement on pasture rent. Are they broken to ride?"

"I don't believe so. They haven't been strong enough to carry a man, due to the drought and famine, and these four are only two years old. These two mares are four and five," he pointed to the dappled gray and a blood bay each in turn, "but they haven't been ridden much since before the famine, if then. My concern was more with their health than their skill under saddle."

Nora frowned. "I could work them for you, break them to ride while they're here. That would be an additional charge."

"Additional!" Robert repeated in dismay. In honesty, he was glad at the thought of letting the horses stay with the obviously-accomplished horsewoman, but he'd already invested more time and money into the animals than he ever stood to get back, and he balked at the thought of further payments.

Still, every day he kept them was another day away from the trade route, which meant he was essentially losing money the longer he was tied down by them.

While they argued, I fluttered near Nora's ear, trying in vain to inform her of the obvious solution, which she remained oblivious to.

Robert had hoped to sell the horses for profit, and this idea

stuck in his head, so he plowed forward in that direction. "You appreciate the fine Arabian bloodlines of these animals, which are nearly impossible to find in this part of Europe."

"I do, of course."

"These are animals fit for a king."

"If a king appreciated equestrian bloodlines, I suppose," Nora said, frowning, for though she knew little of kings, she could not imagine that someone who spent so much time on a throne could understand horses nearly as well as she, who spent most of her time in the saddle. "Take them on to Charmont, then, and see how much the king will give you for them."

Robert could see her opinion in the set of her mouth, and hoped to get on her good side after all. "Would you have me sell these horses to a king, who could afford them but never appreciate them?"

For the first time, Nora was not quick to respond. She'd felt, from the very moment she saw the horses, that they needed care—more than that, she felt *she* needed to care for them. "A king could afford proper care, I suppose," she admitted softly.

"You appreciate these horses, don't you?" Robert asked.

"Yes," Nora answered hesitantly. She suspected Robert was deliberately leading her to his chosen conclusion, and since at that moment she was unable to predict what that conclusion might be, she felt quite wary.

"You think they should receive proper care, and you don't want them to have to travel any farther. It wouldn't be good for them, would it?"

"No, it would not," she admitted, still trying to think where Robert was headed with his argument.

"They should stay here."

"That's what I said some time ago!" Nora was growing frustrated again, and feared the man might try to *sell* the horses to her. Much as she'd have loved to own them, she had no way of buying them. The estate—the land itself, and the buildings on it—were her only assets of value, and she couldn't have parted with any of them even if she'd had legal ownership of them (which, being an unmarried woman, she did not). The

land itself produced very little income, being mostly woods and pasture, with only one small stream. She and her parents couldn't afford servants to work the land for them, even if it had been fertile enough to support such a large household.

Now, Robert was no dummy. He didn't know Nora, of course, but he'd noticed she hadn't offered to buy the horses, and he suspected there must be a reason for that. The Caprese estate was as tidy and fine as that of many a wealthier landowner, though Robert couldn't have known yet its condition was only due to the hard work of Nora and her parents. Since Robert didn't understand her reasons for not offering to buy the horses, and since he didn't want her to become more upset, he made up his mind to avoid mentioning their purchase.

Instead, he smiled graciously. "Since my horses are in need of pasture and training, and since you appreciate their fine bloodlines, and are obviously a skilled horsewoman in your own right …" he pointed to Nora's mount, which she had ridden so expertly in her leap over the wall. "Perhaps we could work out an agreement."

"An agreement?"

"Could you pasture the horses in exchange for a foal by them?"

Nora's eyes twinkled with hope for the very first time. A foal, especially one out of fine Arabian stock, was worth far more than a year's pasture rent for a mere six horses. "You are a businessman," she concluded aloud.

"And you're a savvy horsewoman, aren't you?" Robert knew he'd found a solution. More than that, he went weak in his knees at the sight of her smile, and felt a surprisingly strong surge of hope in his heart.

Nora smiled. "Would you like to stay for dinner?"

"I would."

*

I could go on about Nora and Robert and their romance, I suppose, but I mean to tell Cinderella's story, and if I get caught up telling you about Robert and Nora, it will be ages

before I ever get around to correcting all the misunderstandings about Cinderella's story. Suffice it to say, the two of them worked out a deal with the horses, and when Robert returned from his next trade journey with silks fit for a queen, he suggested Nora might want some for a bridal gown.

When he returned from his next journey after that one, they were married.

By that time the Arabians had given them several foals. Since the Caprese estate legally fell to Robert's name upon his marriage to Nora, he made a gift to his bride of all the horses.

About a year after that, in the spring, they had a daughter who, according to custom, was named Eleanor, after her mother. She went by Ella, and I became her fairy godmother, too.

The next year they had a son, who they named Robert, after his father, though they called him Bertie.

Ella and Bertie were inseparable friends and equally inseparable enemies. When they weren't fighting together they were playing, and they often played at fighting, so that by the time Ella was four and Robert three, they were surprisingly adept at both wrestling and swords.

When Nora saw that her children insisted on striking at one another with sharp sticks, she made both siblings padded swords of wood, covered over with quilting, which they jabbed at each other in the manner they'd seen at the tournaments their father loved to take them to watch in town.

The tournaments were not their only entertainment. Having grown up alongside some of the finest horses in all of Europe (for by that time, their herd of Arabians had grown large), both Ella and Bertie were accomplished riders. They often staged their own contests of riding skill—racing, leaping, and battling with swords on horseback, as they had watched knights do. Being precocious in their equestrian skills, and having witnessed trick riding at a circus or two, over the next several years they taught themselves to ride standing, to switch mounts at high speed, to hoist themselves from standing into the saddles of running horses, and to drop into the saddle from tree

branches above (though their mother put an end to this last one once she discovered it, for fear they'd break their necks).

Besides being close companions to one another, the two children were their father's shadows whenever he was home from his travels, and he missed them terribly whenever he was away. By the time Ella was eight, her parents discussed the possibility that the children might accompany him on his next journey.

Their biggest concern was whether the children would be safe. Travel in those times was uncertain at best, and often precarious. Bandits and highway robbers were known to lie in wait along lonely stretches of road, and pirates plagued the waterways, targeting especially merchants who might be transporting valuables.

But, as Robert correctly pointed out to his concerned wife, though bandits loved to steal and threaten, they very rarely ever killed anyone. "We're their source of income," he reminded Nora. "If they kill us, they cannot rob us on our next journey. No, they only ever take everything they can find, and turn the people loose. Sometimes they'll even leave a man his horses."

"How very comforting," Nora responded sarcastically.

Robert assured his wife, "I've been robbed on three different occasions, and never once was I even injured. And they never took more than half my inventory, mostly because they couldn't carry it all. I've always disguised my most valuable possessions, so they passed those over, too."

"Disguised your most valuable possessions," Nora repeated in a thoughtful tone, her eyes bright.

Robert knew the look, and he realized what his wife must be thinking. "You're worried mostly about Ella, aren't you?"

"Of course."

"She's a strong girl, able with the sword, as skilled on horseback as any grown man."

"Yes, but she's also a *girl*, and a lovely one at that. For some bandits, she would be a greater prize than gold."

"But if we disguised her as a boy," Robert mused. "She and Bertie could easily pass as brothers. No one would question

her."

"She'd love it," Nora predicted with a laugh. "She'd think it the most delightful game, to fool everyone."

Robert smiled, not just at the sound of his wife's laughter, which had always cheered him, but because he could see a way it might be possible for his children to accompany him on his journeys. It would mean he could be with them instead of being absent from them for the long months it took him to travel from their home, to India, and back again. More than that, it would give the children an opportunity to see the wonders of the world, to taste the flavors of different cultures, and to meet people who lived lives far different from their own.

When Nora and Robert explained the idea to their children, Ella and Bertie were elated. Their father had long regaled them with tales of his adventures, and they'd always thrilled over the trade goods he brought from afar, so the thought of going on such a journey, of seeing things they'd only ever been told about before, gave them such a sense of giddy anticipation, they were beside themselves with happiness.

I, however, was (quite understandably), beside myself with concern.

Windowsills and whippoorwills, what do you expect? As a fairy godmother, my primary duty—my whole reason for being, really—is to look after my godchild. Now Ella was going to be exposed to all manner of dangers the likes of which I'd rarely encountered before—dangers I would not be able to anticipate, and would unlikely be prepared to protect her from.

Needless to say, I was concerned about the whole plan, and would have gladly taken any excuse to keep the children home, save for one thing.

Ella was so excited to go.

If you'd seen the eagerness on her face, the glow of anticipation in her eyes…if you'd known the longing with which she'd watched for her father's return every time his journeys away kept him a single day longer than expected…well, you'd know I couldn't ask her to stay.

Magical creature that I am, I do have a weakness. My

weakness is making my godchild happy. And I knew nothing would make her happier than traveling with her father and brother, so I didn't try to keep her home.

That left only one outlet for all my nervous worry, which was to do everything in my power to keep Ella as safe as she could possibly be. If I wasn't prepared to protect Ella, she'd have to be prepared to protect herself.

I raised the subject with Nora, and she spoke to Robert about it. They both agreed the children should understudy with a skilled swordsman. Robert himself was adept with a blade, and had taught them many things, but he was a merchant, not a soldier, and there was much about fighting he did not know.

What he did know, however, was the name of a man who'd tutored some of the finest swordsmen in Europe. Gustav Adessi was getting on in years, and had actually determined twice before that he'd like to retire. But the spirit of adventure had never left him, and though he'd always longed to travel, his previous employers had always kept him tied to their estates, so when offered his full expenses paid on exotic journeys to the far east in exchange for swordsmanship lessons, he was happy to join the party.

Gustav was a slender whip of a fellow. Even at his advanced age, he was as quick as the swords he wielded, with a long beak of a nose, and small, deep-set eyes which darted as swiftly as the tip of his blade, missing little. His vision at distance was as sharp as that of any youngster, and he carried a monocle tucked into his shirt pocket for those times when he needed to see details up close.

Though a master swordsman, Gustav was accomplished in all the popular arms of the day—pole staffs, bludgeons, axes, maces, mauls, lances, hammers, longbows, crossbows, slings and daggers. There were more than that, I'm sure of it. Tickle-brained talismans, I've probably forgotten half of them! Gustav would chide me for forgetting, but by now he's long dead of old age, and I'm still here, so my version of the tale will have to do.

The point of it is, Gustav taught the children more than just

sword work. They learned to defend themselves—with their feet and fists, if necessary. And in the course of their travels, as Gustav learned of the oriental fighting weapons and techniques, he passed these also along to his charges.

But oh, bombastic bobolink, I'm getting ahead of myself! All of this is to say, Gustav agreed to travel with Robert and his crew.

Thus it was that, at the tender age of nine, Ella put her hair up in a flat knot hidden under a cap, donned trousers, strapped on a child's short sword, and set off with her father's merchant party to see the world.

Chapter Three

During their traveling years, Ella and Bertie had such grand adventures, I could fill a whole book with the stories. Of the times they got lost, and found their way back to their father again. Of the time Bertie traded a horse for an elephant, and then Robert had to find a way to make the trade back again (and Bertie so loved that elephant, if it hadn't been that the traded horse was one of Nora's favorites and Robert knew he *had* to get it back, Cinderella's carriage to the ball might have one day been pulled by a very different animal).

Both children learned about the various cultures spanning Europe and Persia and India, and even into the Orient. They tasted foreign cuisines, and at times recommended their father import a certain spice, even if it was unfamiliar to the merchants back home, simply because they liked the taste of it. In this way, they brought new flavors to their homeland.

With Gustav, they practiced fighting nearly every day, oftentimes for long hours as they walked along the road, fighting as they walked, or sometimes, standing to fight, running ahead, and pausing to fight again.

But more than the regular practice of fighting, they learned the sword techniques of the places they visited. Gustav was especially keen on discovering new tricks to add to his repertoire. They added entire weeks to their trips to the Orient so that Gustav could study the weapons and martial arts of those cultures, which he then taught Ella and Bertie to use along with traditional fighting methods. It was not uncommon to see them strike with their swords, then kick with their feet, dodge a blow by tumbling into a roll, and block an incoming strike by spinning around backwards to meet their opponent's blade.

The children became so skilled in martial arts, they could fight even without their swords—without any weapon at all, if they had to.

More than one season, their path overlapped with that of a traveling circus, and Ella and Bertie marveled at the acrobatic feats of their tumbling crew. When camped alongside the circus party, the siblings tried to imitate the somersaults and handsprings, and the tumblers took pity on them, and taught them several different moves. Though they never became as skilled as the circus performers, the siblings learned a variety of flips and vaulting maneuvers, which they added to their fighting repertoire.

In addition to her fascination with acrobatics and fighting, Ella was particularly fond of maps, and sought out cartographer's shops in the cities they visited. To her father's amusement, she amassed a collection of local maps of the cities and regions through which they traveled.

Robert's amusement turned to gratitude when Ella was able to use her maps to help them find their way around flooded roads, washed out bridges, or routes which were reported to have been plagued by bandits. So her interests became a skill, and Robert came into the habit of consulting her whenever he planned their travel routes.

Over the course of her traveling years, Ella learned many languages. Not fluently, of course, but enough to get herself in and out of mischief in every land they visited. She made many friends, though few of them ever learned who she really was.

Gustav was the only man who ever questioned her claim to be a boy. The people most likely to realize the truth were women—mostly those who tended the bathhouses Ella visited in the cities they traveled through. But by and large, nearly every person she encountered never thought to question her claim to be a boy named Allard.

It took Gustav a year to even suspect anything, and he might never have found out the real truth, even then, if I hadn't lost my temper.

As I've mentioned, I try never to let anyone see me, save those under my care. Of course, Robert knows of me because I grew to full size after Ella was born, when I gave her the gift I give all my godchildren: the gift of three wishes, to be used

whenever she chose (but three only for her whole life—even fairy power has its limits).

And Bertie had spotted me when he was quite young. Small children have always been better at seeing fairies than grownups are. Perhaps it is because the very young are still open to wonder, or that their eyes have not become too clouded by life experience. Sadly, grownups often miss the reality of what's right in front of them.

Which is precisely why I felt sure I would be safe around Gustav. But I'd forgotten the corollary of the sight of the very young: as they age into their waning years, some humans become open to magic again. They stop taking for granted that they know everything, and begin to open their eyes to see what is truly there.

Such was the case with Gustav. I don't know when he first spotted me, but there were times when I'd catch him blinking in my direction, squinting and craning his head forward, even, as though he'd noticed that one dust mote liked to dance always close to Allard's head.

Then, one day, Ella and her brother were sparring with swords in a clearing in the woods, and I was sitting atop Ella's cap, like a tiny lit spark, hardly more than a glint of sunlight. They'd been sparring for some time, and Ella, as sometimes happened toward the end of a long bout, was growing tired. Specifically, her arms and shoulders were tired of holding her sword high, and so she let it sag a bit, giving her brother openings, which he was bright enough to take advantage of.

Fairies, though small, have emotions as big as that of any human, and arguably bigger. And we squeeze all that fervor and passion into bodies which are ordinarily almost microscopic. Needless to say, this makes us as explosive as a spark in a room full of gunpowder. At this moment, as Ella was letting her sword droop, and her brother was scoring points, or almost scoring them, I began to glow brighter than usual, and to stomp on Ella's cap, trying to goad her into remembering to fight, no matter how tired she felt.

With all my attention focused on the fight, I let myself

glow a little too bright, and buzz a bit too loudly. Who knows when Gustav first spotted me? Gongoozling gardyloo! I didn't realize what a spectacle I'd made of myself until Gustav told the pair of them to stop, and he tromped between them and stared straight at me.

He stared silently for one long second, holding his monocle up to his eye, blinking, looking without it, and then looking through it again. Finally, he laughed.

It took all my restraint not to fly at Gustav and shush him (remember, I was already excited). But he'd chosen a moment when Ella and her brother were away from the others, practicing their skills in a clearing in the woods at a bit of distance from their camp, so there was no one to overhear, and the siblings decided it was time to let Gustav in on the secret.

Once Gustav learned I was, indeed, a fairy, he quickly deduced the obvious (since only girls have fairy godmothers). And so Bertie and Ella confessed that Allard was really Ella. They made him promise to keep the secret, and he did.

But kudzu and kittiwakes! Here I am, telling you about their traveling years, when we must get on with the story. All you really need to know of that time in Ella's life was what came of it: she and her father and brother grew quite close—though of course, she always missed her mother when she was away, since Nora stayed behind to tend the house and horses. Ella learned skills that would become surprisingly helpful later in her life.

The most significant thing to come out of the travels, at least in terms of its importance to the story (and this is where Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm did history a terrible disservice by cutting out facts they felt didn't serve the storyline (but then, they thought the story was all about how pretty Cinderella looked, as if that was the most important thing about her (cockamamie codswallop!))) was that Bertie and Ella began to compete in tournaments.

They started out playing at tournaments with other children, the same way children in other places play the popular games and sports of their culture. Just as children in your

neighborhood might break into teams to play with a ball, Ella and Bertie and the children they met on the road played at tournament, and it became a well-established fact that the two brothers from Caprese were skilled riders and swordsmen.

Most nights when they were traveling, they slept in their wagons at byways along the road, which were like campgrounds for you modern folk.

At these campgrounds there were often other travelers, and many of these parties included children and teens who played at tournament with Bertie and Ella. Gustav would act as both coach and judge, along with some of the other elders, and the children would fight until all the sunlight had been drained from the sky, and sometimes, if their fires were bright enough and the sky clear and the moon full, they'd fight into the night.

Over the years, Robert's path had crossed many times with those of other merchants and travelers, and the children made friends with several of these folk, and were always excited when they encountered them again on future trips.

It was one of these friends, an older boy named Rolf, who was gangly and freckled and not much good at swords, but passing fair at pole staffs and quite decent with any kind of arrow (I suspect he was slightly farsighted) who told Ella and Bertie about the first tournament. The events were to be held near the city they were headed towards already, and the timing was right that they'd be in town in time to participate. In addition to the regular men's tournament for participants ages fourteen and older, there was to be a junior tournament open to those eight to thirteen years of age (Ella was ten at that time).

To say the children were excited would be inadequate. Even I buzzed brightly at the news (though not so brightly Rolf might notice me—I did learn my lesson after Gustav). Their travels had been dull and their campgrounds rather empty of friends for a full week before that, so the news brightened their hearts all the more for the relief it brought to the streak of dismal days.

Robert was not so keen on the idea. Oh, I saw his eyes brighten when he first heard word of the event. Anyone could

tell he'd have loved to stay and watch.

It was the idea of his children competing—especially his daughter, disguised as a boy, fantastic fighter though she was—that made him frown and shake his head at the thought. "Let's discuss it inside the wagon," he told the children, well mindful that Rolf and the other travelers could not be allowed to hear his biggest argument against participation—that Allard was a girl.

The children, who were raised to be obedient anyway, and who knew exactly why their father didn't want to speak openly about his concerns, followed their father into the clapboard wagon, which was only soundproof as long as no one yelled.

"Tournaments are for men and boys," Robert reminded his children in a heavy whisper once the wagon door was securely shut.

"It's not fair if only I can participate," Bertie argued. He knew full well his sister was at least as good as he was at most events, and notably better at swords. Like the others, including Gustav, he'd often wondered how they'd fare if pitted against other junior fighters in a real tournament. Based on how they did against their fellow travelers, he supposed they'd perform rather well.

But he couldn't know for sure unless they actually entered the tournament.

After a long silent frown, Robert concluded, "Then neither of you should enter. I don't want you getting hurt. Men die in tournaments sometimes, you know. I won't risk that."

"Men die in *real* tournaments," Ella noted. "This is a junior tournament. It's specifically made for children, which we are. It's safer than the real thing."

Robert nodded solemnly, and looked Ella full in the face with apology brimming like unshed tears in his eyes. "That doesn't change who you are."

"Maybe I don't want to be who I am!" Ella's voice got louder than a whisper.

Her father quieted her with a look. "Your mother used to say the same thing. She said it for years, especially when they

told her she couldn't inherit Caprese because she wasn't a man. But if she hadn't been who she is, she wouldn't have married me and we wouldn't have you, and what good would Caprese be then, if we didn't have the two of you to share it with?"

"What good are the two of us," Bertie countered, "if we don't get to do anything? If we don't get to live? Come on—if we can't enter the tournament, that's the same as not having any children at all!" His voice got a bit loud, too, but he didn't care, and he hadn't said anything anyone on the outside wouldn't have expected him to say.

"Yes!" Ella added, also not very quietly. "What's the point of even having children if you're going to keep them locked away? If you don't let us live, we might as well be dead."

I flew up to a knothole in one of the higher clapboards and peeked out. The others had gone on their way and weren't really listening, anyway.

By the time I flew down, the tears in Robert's eyes were no longer unshed. "You two and your mother mean more to me than anything, than everything else in all the world." He took a great breath and sniffed away his tears. "Nothing brings me more joy than to see the two of you doing what you love. You're right, I suppose, though the thought of what could happen to you terrifies me. You're put on this earth to live. So live. Fight. You have my blessing."

With that, the children tackled their father with hugs and kisses, thanking him and assuring him they would be fine, and probably safer in the long run, for all they'd learn at the tournament that would help them improve their fighting skills.

So the children competed. It was just a few events that first tournament, but they did well—even Gustav was impressed, and he'd tutored many a knight in his time. They made friends at that tournament and the next and the next, and those friends made sure to keep them always informed of more contests and when and where, so that Robert's days became half chasing down tournaments, and half merchant trade.

It wasn't so good for them financially, but he wasn't about to complain.

Over the course of many contests, the children tried all manner of sports, and learned they weren't nearly as good with arrows as with swords. After a year of success and no serious injuries (Ella did once wrench her pinkie finger awfully hard, and Bertie got a bruised rib several times, since he tended to focus overmuch on the kinds of offensive maneuvers which left his sides unguarded) their father let them try the mounted melee.

The melee, for those of you who've never had the fortune to watch one, is a kind of mock battle where two sides rush one another, and fight using lances and swords until all the riders on one side are dismounted. It's a true testing of skill, but it's also the place where participants are most likely to be injured, though of course in the junior tournament, all the weapons are made of wood—unlike the real tournament, where swords are blunted, but otherwise real.

The most common and ugliest injuries in the melee are the tramplings. But, as Ella and Bertie argued until their father finally consented to let them try it, the only ones who ever got trampled were those who were knocked from their horses. Since the siblings had learned to ride before they even quite knew how to walk (with Nora for their mother, you might expect that), they could stick to their mounts better than many men could stick to their own feet.

So Robert relented, and the children soon proved to be exceptionally good at mounted melee—so much so that their father eventually allowed them to also participate in the foot melee (technically safer than mounted, since there were no horses to trample anyone, as Bertie pointed out while his father rolled his eyes and sighed).

In the course of a few years, the children became so good at the sport that Ella (or Allard, as she was known in the circuit) made a name for herself (himself) as being one of the best fighters to watch as she approached her fourteenth year.

But fourteen wasn't just the age at which boys became men, as far as tournaments were concerned.

It was also the age at which girls were expected to put

aside childish things, and focus on becoming women.

The birthday loomed, for Ella, like a guillotine, threatening to cut off everything in life that made her life worth living. For not only would she no longer be allowed to compete, or even to practice the sports she loved so much (not even her indulgent father would let her fight in the ring with grown men), but it was at that age that girls of her station were sent away to become handmaids, or ladies-in-waiting, in other households.

More than anything, Ella dreaded being sent away from the family she loved, to a place where she would be expected to act, not just like a girl, but like a lady.

And though her parents and I all knew the transition would be a difficult one for her, none of us could see any way around it.

Fairies may be able to work magic, but we're otherwise bound by the same rules as everyone else, and I knew of no enchantment that would save Ella from becoming a handmaid.

Just as concerning—because no amount of skill with the sword would make up for lack of feminine refinement—I had no magic that would make her a lady.

Chapter Four

This, I suppose, is where Cinderella's story properly begins. All I've told you so far is background, but it's the very background Perrault and the Grimms skipped over, which is why their stories so completely failed to capture what really happened between Cinderella and the prince. So this is precisely the background you need to know in order to understand (to really understand) Cinderella's story.

While I'm on the subject, I imagine the Grimms never knew any of the parts I've related thus far, since Perrault had failed to include so much, and he and those who came between were the Grimm brothers' primary sources of the tale. But why did Charles Perrault exclude the truth?

Perhaps it was because he wanted the prince to be a hero, and if he had told the whole truth, everyone would have known the real hero was a girl. Then again, I doubt Perrault was aware enough of his own motivations to understand why he chose to remove from the story the parts he cut.

Likely his reason was a simple one. If we can take a clue from the way Perrault swooned over Cinderella's looks in his version of the story, I imagine he thought the point of the tale was how she looked, and not who she was. Perhaps he couldn't understand why the prince loved her so fiercely, and assumed it must have been because of her beauty?

His very inability to understand Cinderella is our biggest clue to her struggle.

Handmaids, or ladies-in-waiting, which is the more proper but cumbersomely-worded title, were meant to be pretty bits of flutter with little substance. Like bridesmaids at a wedding (a tradition directly descended from ladies-in-waiting), handmaids were meant to add décor and a bit of function, flitting here and there like butterflies, framing the bride or the lady of the house like an arbor of flowers, adding emphasis to her beauty.

Perrault understood handmaids, and crafted his story to be

that of a girl who was vaulted from the lowest rank of handmaid to the highest. But Cinderella never wanted to be either of those things, and she has been misunderstood for centuries, just as she was misunderstood by Madame Augusta De Bouchard, who she served first as handmaid, and later as step-daughter.

Oh, piffling pettifogger! I'm getting ahead of myself now.

Back we go to the last few days of age thirteen, to Ella when she was on the cusp of losing everything she cared about, to become who society thought she ought to be.

I remember one night, when it was just Robert's party camping alone in the woods, and they were only a day or two away from reaching Caprese and Nora, when Ella and her father were sitting by the campfire, and I was alight like a tiny blue spark on her cap.

Bertie and Gustav and the two hired men who were working for Robert at that time had all turned in for the night, leaving just Robert and Ella to watch the fire, which was smoldering down to cinders and ashes.

The wood, as it burned, crumbled to cinders, which fell away from the main logs, rolling a bit through the ash as they tumbled, and frequently losing their glow in the process. Ella had watched the cinders do this a thousand times, on a thousand different nights. But that evening, she was missing her mother especially, and couldn't wait to get home to see her. At the same time, she was mindful of her fourteenth birthday looming far too close in the future, and the likelihood that she would be separated from her family much like those cinders were separated from the rest of the fire.

"Do you ever watch the cinders fall, Father?" She asked, ideas swirling in her mind like the pictures painted by clouds in the sky—shifting, becoming one thing and then another, clear for only an instant before they changed into some other form entirely.

"Of course I do, night after night. They remind me of stars, or fairies when they're at their smallest." He reached over and patted her cap, narrowly missing me.

Ella felt slightly encouraged by his words, so she continued, even though she wasn't exactly sure what picture she was making in her mind. "Some of the cinders, when they fall, they tumble away all by themselves, and their fire goes out."

"They get too cold," her father explained. "Without the heat of the rest of the fire, there's nothing but their own fire to keep them burning, and sometimes that's not enough."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Ella whispered.

"Of what?"

Ella tried to make sense of her thoughts, and realized there was more to it that she needed to explain. "Some of the cinders fall away in a clump. As long as they stay together, even if they roll farther from the fire, they still glow. They still burn, because they have each other. And you and I and Bertie, our fire stays warm because we have each other. But when I go away to be a handmaid…"

"Your fire will never go out." Robert must have understood what she was getting at. His assurance came swiftly, unbidden.

"But what if it does? If I'm all alone—how do you know it won't go out then?"

"You're my little Cinder, Ella. You're my Cinderella." Robert chuckled, pleased with the sound of the name he'd just made up. "You have in you a fire that's unlike any other. Brighter. Stronger. I've seen you fight. Do you know why you win? It's not because you're bigger than the boys—you're not. You're smaller than nearly all of the boys in your age bracket. And it's not because you're stronger—not physically stronger, anyway. But your fire burns. It burns strong. That's why you win."

"Gustav says it's because I'm agile."

"Well, that's something, too. But I've seen plenty of agile men who can't cut their way one inch through a melee the way you cut your way all the way to the winner's podium. You have fire, Cinderella. Look at your mother."

"Mother?"

"She's alone at Caprese every time we leave, but her fire

never falters."

"She has her horses."

"She does. And you'll still have…" Robert paused, trying to think what Ella would have that she loved that would never leave her, not even at Madame De Bouchard's.

"What will I have?" Ella asked in a whisper, afraid there was nothing, after all…that she was right, that her fire would go out, just as the fire before them was crumbling away into ashes, dark as the night, and dead. I felt her despair, and wished to reassure her that I'd still be with her, at least. But since I'd never been much use to her ever before, I couldn't think what help I'd be at Madame De Bouchard's.

"You'll still have your fire." Robert's answer sounded more hopeful than confident.

"Will I? How?"

"Because you're my Cinder, Ella. You have more fire than a thousand men."

"But, when I'm all alone—"

"Enough questions for one night. We've got a long road yet to get home, and we need our rest." Robert stood and poured water over the fire from the bucket he kept nearby every evening for that purpose.

Cinderella watched the glowing coals disappear behind a hissing cloud of steam, which billowed toward her, its scent a paradox of fire and water. The vapor spiraled skyward and fled away until there were only a few glowing coals left, and Robert took the shovel he'd used to dig the fire pit, and turned them under, stomping the damp earth to be sure there would be no stray embers to set the forest aflame while they slept.

Each stomp of his boots seemed to crush her heart just as it smothered the flames, and Cinderella stared at the blackened circle of earth and wondered if she wasn't looking at a picture of her future.

When we reached Caprese, Nora was already in the middle of preparations for sending Ella to Madame De Bouchard's. She'd taken Ella's measurements before we'd left on our last merchant journey, and had prepared a fantastic wardrobe—

gowns of the finest silks, as well as riding habits, traveling frocks, and simple cotton dresses for everyday wear, all sewn with extra fabric hemmed under at the ends and seams, so they could be let out as Ella grew.

Ella tried on each in turn, and stood before the great polished bronze mirror in her mother's dressing room, marveling at her reflection.

She looked like a woman—like a real, grown woman, and not a girl. She spun and twirled and watched the fabric move with her, and giggled and thanked her mother many times over. But pleased as she was by the dresses and her mother's obvious care in preparing such an ensemble, Ella couldn't shake the sense that something was missing.

There were no sparring outfits, no pants at all, no leather armor such as she wore to tournaments (metal armor didn't become common until much later, you understand—it was all quilted under-layers and hard-tanned leather for several centuries).

She enjoyed the dresses, and she appreciated them, and she loved how lovely she looked wearing them, but all the same, she felt as though a very important part of herself was being cut away, shed like the skins snakes left next to saplings, an empty shell of their former selves.

Except that she felt like the empty shell, as though the vital part of her life had slithered away and left her behind.

Two days later, Rolf stopped by on his way to Charmont. Bertie spotted him first, and with quick thinking, called out an overly-loud greeting so Ella could hear and change into Allard's garb before Rolf or the members of his party saw her and realized she wasn't who she claimed to be.

By the time Ella scrambled into pants and got her hair properly stuffed away under a cap, Bertie and their parents had Rolf in the parlor with tea, and everyone was talking animatedly about the tournament Rolf was traveling to see.

"Of course you'll be there!" Rolf looked at them as though his assumption was not a matter of question.

Bertie shot an uncertain, almost apologetic look at Ella.

Robert cleared his throat. "Bertie and I were planning to go, only to watch. It's such a large tournament. I'm afraid the children would be overwhelmed."

"Nonsense!" Rolf protested. "This is the perfect opportunity for them to show what they're made of! They could rise to some level of status, catch the king's eye, be on their way to becoming knights, even!"

Now Child, you may be confused if you've heard that only knights could compete in tournaments in the first place. In later centuries this would prove to be true. But in Ella's day, knights were very rare, and any tournament composed only of those knights who could prove their nobility for four generations back (as eventually became the standard) would have been a very small tournament indeed.

In those early days of tournaments, any able noble could compete, and some became knights because of it, which is how there eventually became enough knights to make the rule of only having knights competing. But as with the other changes that would evolve in later centuries, such as metal armor, the prominence of the joust, and the rule that winners could take the horses of their beaten opponents, in Ella's day, none of that was yet true.

But all of that is quite aside from Rolf's insistence that Allard compete.

Ella realized she needed to explain, before Rolf began to question overmuch. She stepped forward, and in her deepest voice, explained. "Bertie and I have never fought in the melee without one another. We've always had each other's backs. But I turn fourteen tomorrow. I've given my birthdate at every tournament I've entered, so they'll have it on record. I won't be able to compete in the junior division. I'd be with the grown men."

"And I'd be alone," Bertie added quickly.

Rolf talked right over Bertie, burying his words as he rushed to protest Ella's argument. "You belong with the grown men. That's where you'll finally break out. Isn't that where you've always wanted to be? Isn't that what you've been

fighting for all along?"

Truth be told, and I could see it in Rolf's eyes as well as the others could, Rolf would have given anything to have the skill with a sword that Allard possessed. He was decent enough with arrows, but sparring and melee were the big events everyone cared about (in the centuries before the joust rose to prominence). It had been one of Rolf's greatest pleasures to see his young friends do so well in those coveted events, and because of that, it grieved him to think they might not compete.

"I've got to grow up and take on real responsibilities," Ella told him. "That's my duty, not fighting."

While the others held this conversation, Nora sat quietly, wearing a thoughtful, almost pensive expression which I knew quite well. I'd known her since she was born, and that knowledge, combined with my particularly keen gift of intuition and familiarity with the larger situation, gave me such insight, I could well guess what Nora was thinking.

She had her reservations about sending Ella to be a handmaid for Madame De Bouchard. Had Nora really known the woman, she never would have sent Ella to stay with her. But the De Bouchard name had a sterling reputation, and if the woman was rumored to be a bit strict, well, Ella had been allowed to run a little too free for several years, and might benefit from the woman's zealous standards (or so Nora tried to convince herself whenever anyone mentioned that Madame De Bouchard's last three handmaids had left in tears).

Ella was made of stronger stuff than most girls. Nora believed she could succeed where others failed.

But she still had her doubts, and I could see from her expression that she was having sincere second thoughts about forcing Ella to miss the tournament. Besides that, as Nora had expressed with a certain wistfulness before, she'd never herself been allowed to try tournament fighting, and might have liked it. Probably would have, given how much she adored riding. But marrying late in life had been her great rebellion.

And tournaments were Ella's. Nora could empathize with her daughter's plight. But would she do anything about it?

Now, I may not have much magic, but I'm not helpless. Seeing Nora's face thus, and sensing that she might be the only one present with the wherewithal to change their established plans (especially in light of the fact that Nora herself was the one who established those plans with Madame De Bouchard), I knew I had to act.

I gathered my strength and, growing in size from a speck the size of a dust mote, to something more along the lines of a chubby winged mosquito, I flew full-speed at Nora's head, and barreled into her temple.

She looked dazed for an instant, then shook her head. Her eyes brightened, and she cut off whatever the men were saying (Rolf had begun to list off the other men he knew of who'd be fighting in the tournament).

"You know," Nora said in an assertive voice, "I've never watched Allard fight in a tournament."

The men all turned and looked at her, somewhat stunned.

Rolf was the first to break into a grin. He was much quicker with his wit than with the sword, and insisted, "This tournament is the perfect opportunity for you to see him fight! Charmont isn't far from here. It's what, half a day's journey by carriage?"

"Less than that," Robert corrected. "And much less by horse—there's a faster route carriages cannot navigate."

"What day is the melee?" Nora asked.

"Saturday," Rolf answered, beaming with hope. "Participants can register any time, right up until the event begins. If Allard is planning to retire from fighting to attend to other responsibilities, it only makes sense to see him fight before it's all over and he falls out of practice, yes?"

Nora looked at her husband.

He seemed puzzled, so I flew into his temple as well. That shook him from his stupor, and he laughed. "It wouldn't hurt much, I don't suppose."

Ella had been listening with bated breath, hardly daring to hope she might be allowed to go.

Nora laughed as well. "I haven't had a day in the city in

nearly a year. I'm overdue."

"So that's it, then?" Ella had to school her voice into something deeper than a squeak. "I can compete?"

"You've been so good and patient about consenting to our other plans, no matter your misgivings." If Nora held any reservations about agreeing, they disappeared when she saw the happiness blossom on her daughter's face. "One last tournament won't put us too far off schedule. And I want to see you fight."

"Thank you! Thank you!" Ella hugged her parents each in turn, before Rolf insisted they ought to get in a bit of practice that very afternoon. So Ella and Bertie went outside with Rolf and the rest of his party, leaving Nora and Robert to exchange worried glances.

"Do you think we're doing the right thing?" Nora asked. "I don't want her to get hurt."

"She's never been hurt before, but she's only ever fought against children. This is a real fight, against men."

Robert and his wife walked to the doorway that led to the courtyard, where Ella had already picked up a sword, and matched blades with the boys, her face spread in a wide grin.

Nora sighed. "We can't very well change our minds now. It would crush her."

Ella fought back against the others, blocking every blow.

"She can handle it," Robert decided aloud. "I think."

Chapter Five

Ella was so excited about being allowed to compete, she never had time to be properly terrified about what she was about to do. Rolf supplied them all with a full schedule of events for the tournament. The family, along with Gustav (who would not have been kept away by anything), decided to travel to the city on Friday morning, which would allow them to arrive in time for Ella to compete at swords that afternoon.

The roads to Charmont, including the narrow horse path, which the family took, were filled with travelers headed to the tournament. The traffic slowed their pace, which meant they arrived later than they'd planned, and Ella just had time to scarf down a roasted chicken leg from a vendor as she made her way to the sparring ring.

She'd gone already dressed to fight, with most of her armor already in place, so that she had only to tie her leather helmet on over her cap before she fought.

Looking back, I'm convinced it was a good thing Ella was late. Had she arrived in time to look around and assess the men she'd be fighting against, she might well have lost her courage after all.

I'm not at all exaggerating when I say there were men competing that day who outweighed her three times over—or more. Given her record competing in junior tournaments (which was a matter familiar to most fans of the sport, and especially well-known by those who worked the registration tables) she was assigned for her first fight, not to a featherweight beginner, but to a full-grown man more than twice her age, who was as hairy as a bear, and whose primary fighting technique was to hold his sword above his head, roar with rage, and rush his opponent with a series of wild cuts, which were meant to intimidate especially those inexperienced swordsmen.

If Ella hadn't several times faced boys who took much the same approach, she might have screamed and run away, and that would have been the end of the fight for her. But she'd been in the ring enough times to know exactly what to do. When the man first raised his sword and began to roar, she rushed him, but not headlong. Rather, she darted to the side of him, cutting him as she leapt past, then spinning and scoring another quick point on the man's unguarded back.

The bear was furious with her then. Unfortunately for him, fury tended to dull his senses, and he simply whipped his sword around madly in hopes that she'd be foolish enough to get too close and run into his blade.

With two points already on her side, Ella kept her distance and waited for the man to tire, which didn't take long. As he swung his blade in an ever-slowing circuit, she watched his pattern, predicted an opening, and scored a third point.

The bear didn't score at all, and Ella advanced.

The win did a great deal to bolster her confidence, which was helpful, because with every round, as the losers were eliminated (technically it was double elimination—each man had to lose twice before being cut), the competition was narrowed to the strongest, most skillful swordsmen.

Ella won her second match with only one point scored against her.

By the third round, the registrars were arranging the brackets to pit undefeated swordsmen against their undefeated fellows, which meant Ella faced a man who'd gone twice unbeaten himself. By this point, she'd had enough time between rounds to watch other fights (there were a dozen different rings, all of them hosting one fight after another in rapid succession, all of them surrounded by cheering fans), and had noticed the sharp difference between this tournament and those she was used to.

It was a bigger tournament than many she'd attended, but that alone didn't bother her. Rather, it was the fact that, at the junior tournaments, she'd grown to be one of the oldest competitors, and though not larger than most of her fellow

participants, she was, at least, not terrifically dwarfed. In this tournament, everyone was older, and in most cases significantly bigger than she was.

Everyone.

And it started to unsettle her.

When she received her assignment for the next round, she didn't recognize the name of her opponent. But Bertie was headed toward her to learn of her assignment, with an excited Rolf at his side.

"Who'd you get, Allard?" Bertie asked.

Ella scrunched her nose into a face that said she didn't recognize the name. "Raedwald of Nordheim?"

Rolf's mouth fell open and he looked at Bertie, who was just as unfamiliar with the name as his sister. Rolf laughed. "You don't know who that is?"

When Ella and Bertie both shook their heads, Rolf explained, delighted to be the expert. "When the royals fight, they don't do so under their royal names. They assume false names to hide their identities. Supposedly this is because no honorable knight would go into the ring against his king or any of those close in line for the throne. I've also heard it's to keep anyone from using the fight as an excuse to assassinate a ruler they don't like. Neither of those excuses mean much, though, because it's no secret who they really are."

Ella nodded, waiting to hear the true identity of the man she was scheduled to fight. When Rolf didn't supply the name, she asked, "So, who is Raedwald of Nordheim?"

Rolf hooted gleefully, clearly relishing his exclusive knowledge. They'd ducked behind a vendor's tent, and Rolf revealed the secret in a whisper as the three of them kept their heads bent close together in a circle. "Richard the fourth, the king's nephew."

"Richard?" Ella repeated, also in a whisper.

"The fourth?" Bertie echoed.

"Yes. You know, his father is Richard the third, King Henry's brother, third in line to the throne."

"That makes Richard the fourth, what, fourth in line?" Ella

was trying to sort out how much trouble she'd be in if she accidentally hurt the man.

"That's it," Rolf said. "Prince Henry is second in line. He's the only son of the king. His sisters can't inherit, of course, so until Prince Henry marries and has a son, the Richards are third and fourth."

"And I'm going to fight him?" Ella asked, still grappling with the unexpected news.

"Unless you withdraw. You can withdraw on grounds of his royalty, but it will still count as a loss against you, which leaves only one loss left for you to be eliminated. And it's considered rather poor form to withdraw on those grounds, because it exposes the fact that your opponent is a royal."

Bertie scowled. "I thought you said everyone knew."

"Everyone knows secretly. This would expose him openly," Rolf explained. "They're two very different things." Rolf straightened and took a step back from their circle, speaking in a full voice for the first time since he'd revealed Raedwald's true identity. "I think you should fight him."

"Do you think he'll win?" Bertie asked (referring to his sister as "he," which is what Rolf thought Allard was).

"Better chance of winning if he fights than if he withdraws."

"How good a swordsman is Raedwald?" Ella asked.

"He's had all the best tutors and the best armor, but he angers easily, lets it go to his head, stops thinking and just swings. One of your biggest strengths, Allard, is that you're smart. You don't let anything rattle you."

"Do you think I can win?"

"You've got as much chance as anyone, but only if you fight. Speaking of, we'd best find your ring. They'll call your round before long."

Ella followed the boys. She was glad to find her parents and Gustav before they reached the ring. In excited but hushed tones, Bertie and Rolf informed the others of the true identity of the man Ella would be fighting.

Gustav's beady eyes twinkled. "I've watched him fight. I'd

like to see him soundly beaten. You can do it."

"Do you really think I can?" Ella asked, quite unsure of herself.

"He's got a weakness. Every swordsman does."

At this news, Ella felt relieved. "Good. What is it?"

Gustav made a face. "I can't quite put my finger on it. The man is merciless."

"Merciless?" Ella felt her stomach dip. "That's his weakness?"

"Oh, yes." Rolf talked over her, as he was prone to do. "I saw him put a man's eye out in the ring. He had an opening and he took it. He didn't even flinch at the thought that he was blinding the man."

"He blinded him?" Nora asked. She was beginning to have second thoughts about allowing Ella to participate.

"Only in one eye," Rolf assured her. "But that's not the point. Most men would hesitate, show a little courtesy. Decency. Not Raedwald. He'd sooner kill a man than lose to him."

"Are you sure it's a good idea—" Nora began.

But Rolf talked over her, too. "Did you hear that? They're calling Allard to the plate. This way. Hurry!"

The family and Gustav followed Rolf to the assigned ring, and Ella took her place in her assigned plate.

The plates, if you don't know, are the small raised platforms on either side of the ring, where the competitors for the next round stand in wait while the fight before theirs takes place. If a man isn't standing on his plate by the time his round begins, he forfeits.

Ella looked across the ring, past the swordsmen already pitched in battle, to the man who stood on the opposing plate.

Raedwald was large. Not as big as the bear, but still, a full-grown man of above-average size. His leather armor was encased in chain-mail, an expensive luxury few could afford.

Ella had never fought anyone in chain mail. No one in the junior division wore it, as the fighting there wasn't as deadly, and juniors were still growing and replaced their armor often,

so even the wealthy who might have otherwise afforded it didn't bother with the expense.

Raedwald was watching Ella with the kind of haughty, gloating look a proud man might wear when he'd just won.

But Raedwald hadn't won the round. Not yet.

I'd been perched quietly on Ella's cap for most of the day, save when she was actually fighting. Then I'd fly up out of reach of the swords, hovering where I could see the action. Now I flew down, inside her helmet, and grew just large enough that she could hear me speak.

"You are fire," I reminded her. "You are a cinder, Ella."

She turned her head my direction, which sent me tumbling back into her hood.

I scrambled out and up into the sky just as she took her place in the ring.

Raedwald was still gloating as he stepped from his platform, over the rope that marked out the ring, and took his place opposite her.

Ella held her sword at attention, poised, ready.

The round judge picked up the hammer, and struck it once, hard, against the metal gong, and simultaneously turned the sand timer upside-down.

The round began.

Some swordsmen rush at each other the instant the gong sounds. Others dart to one side or another, or feint with their swords in an attempt to force a reaction from their opponents.

Neither Raedwald nor Ella moved. Not a single muscle.

The grains in the sand timer poured from the upper chamber of the vessel to the lower, which was marked into thirds, each of them representing a minute's worth of time. The round judge would tap the gong at the one and two minute marks to convey to them the passing of time. Once the upper chamber was empty, the man would pound repeatedly on the gong to signal the end of the round. Some judges liked to give a series of three raps. Others tended to pound away until the fighters dropped their swords.

It could get a bit disorienting at a big tournament like this

one, with multiple rings, each with their own gong, which was why the rings were spaced well apart, with plenty of room between them for the crowds and vendor's tents.

When the judge rapped the gong, signaling that the first of the three minutes had passed, the pair of them were still standing just as they had at the start.

The crowd, of course, had turned into experts, each spectator shouting, some with advice, others encouragement, and many others ridiculing the two for not fighting.

I'd never seen a round last so long without any action. Usually by the one-minute mark, the two swords would be clashing in a cacophony of strikes and blocks and parries.

After several more long seconds of this, Raedwald made an impatient sort of grunting noise with his throat, and jabbed his sword forward a few inches, pulling the blade back almost instantly to its starting position.

Ella didn't move.

Raedwald made a sneering face. The crowd was getting mean, accusing them both of a lack of intelligence and inability to move (though they used far courser language than I choose to use, Dears). This verbal assault appeared to upset Raedwald almost as much as Ella's lack of attack.

Now, Raedwald was no dummy. No one in the royal house was. I don't doubt that he'd inquired among his contacts ahead of time, and learned that his opponent was fresh out of the junior circuit.

And I saw in the smile that spread on his face that he'd surmised this Allard was frozen stiff.

Raedwald danced forward a single step on light feet, stopping still far out of Ella's reach.

Ella stayed still, but I could see her watching him carefully. She was a smart girl, and I hoped she had the sense not to let him rattle her.

Assuming, of course, that she wasn't scared stiff, as Raedwald supposed.

Raedwald took a step to his right and feinted right, his sword so far from Ella, she might have barely skimmed the tip

of it with her own blade, had she been foolish enough to extend her arm. She wasn't foolish, and didn't move.

As the bell sounded, signaling two of the three minutes had passed, Raedwald took another step to the right, but this time feinting left, his sword slicing the air much closer to Ella, though still not close enough to reach her.

She tipped her blade just far enough to block the blow, though it fell shy of reaching her, and the instant Raedwald stepped back, Ella returned her sword to the ready position.

I was beginning to sweat in the sky. There was less than a minute left, and neither one of the humans below me had scored a single point.

If the round fell to a tie, they'd fight again for one more minute, and if there was no advantage after that, they'd continue to fight, minute by minute, until someone scored.

Eventually, someone would have to make a move. A real move.

I looked at Ella, and could see from the determined glint in her eyes that she wasn't going to move. I turned to Raedwald, half expecting to see a similar determination on his face, but his eyes instead held fury.

What was it Rolf had said? *Raedwald angers easily, lets it go to his head, stops thinking and just swings.*

The sand in the timer was running out rapidly. Just as I began to suspect Raedwald would let the round go into another minute, he darted suddenly forward, whipping his sword down as he ran, letting out a frustrated grunt as he charged.

Ella hadn't taken her eyes off him, and moved as he did, running, not away, but toward him.

Just as their swords were about to meet, Ella spun around, leaping to the side as she did so, leaving Raedwald to stagger past her.

But Ella was still spinning, and whipped her sword around as she spun, striking Raedwald on his side as he went past.

Point.

Chapter Six

Raedwald turned back around in a fury and charged Ella, but she leapt away as the sound of the gong pierced the air. The crowd erupted into a shouting, bellowing throng—half of them thrilled at the upset, the other half feeling Raedwald (a favorite, as it turned out, to win the entire field) had been cheated by Allard's unorthodox strategy (which, they argued, didn't properly count as sword fighting, since all he did was stand there).

But the judge called the match firmly in Allard's favor and, seeing that he was about to be attacked by Raedwald's supporters, ran off to report the winner.

Ella found her family, who ushered her away to the head table to await her next ring assignment.

I could recount to you the rest of her fights, but to be honest, none were as memorable as those first few battles, and over the years since, they've all blurred together in my mind. Ella did well—surprisingly well, even by Rolf's standards, and finished in the top twenty-four overall. Her finish earned her a spot as a key player in the foot melee, which meant she'd have an advantageous starting position close to several other top finishers.

Ella arrived early to the melee field the next day, having slept well in spite of her excitement (mostly because she was so exhausted from fighting the day before). She was a bit sore, but better off than many of the men. As a prudent fighter, she rarely put herself in harm's way (something that could not be said of many others).

Rolf was already at the field, and waved to her excitedly when he saw her approach with her family. "Do you know which side you're on?"

"Blue."

"Blues are over here." Rolf led her to one end of the field, where men were beginning to gather, and a herald with a fistful

of blue sashes accompanied another with a ledger of names.

Ella had already discerned that her team was gathering at that end, but she politely followed Rolf. His presence soon proved to be helpful, as the heralds walked past her several times, ignoring her, until Rolf got their attention.

"Participant here," he barked, clearly annoyed by that point.

"Name?" The herald with the ledger blinked up at Rolf.

"Not me. Him." Rolf clapped a hand on Ella's shoulder.

"Allard of Caprese."

"Ah." The herald looked surprised when he found Allard's name on his list. "You're a top finisher?"

Ella nodded.

The other herald handed her a blue sash. "You'll want to talk to Hugo."

"Hugo?"

"Hugo of Adalaard?" The herald looked annoyed that she didn't seem to recognize the name. "Tall fellow, over there, blue armor." The herald pointed.

Ella spotted the man whose blue-dyed leather armor with its expensive chain-mail panels stood out in a field of mostly brown leather. "I see him. Thank you."

As she headed over to Hugo to introduce herself, she heard one herald whisper to the other, "He doesn't know who Hugo is!"

Obviously, Ella gathered, Hugo was a bit of a celebrity. Just as obviously, if he could afford chain mail, he must come from money, though his mail only protected the most vulnerable areas—his neck and chest—so perhaps he wasn't as wealthy as Raedwald.

Hugo stood talking with a couple of other men, both of whom looked to be in their twenties, or possibly thirties. They had full beards, but didn't show any gray. Ella wasn't sure of Hugo's age, but he didn't look much older than she was. Perhaps part of that was because he had a clean-shaven face, unlike so many of the other men, who wore beards of various lengths.

As she drew closer, Hugo threw his head back and laughed, his white teeth flashing as the golden light of dawn cut across the field.

Ella's heart did an unusual flip inside her.

She wasn't nervous about competing, not any more than she had been the day before. Still, she found her mouth going unexpectedly dry as she approached the young man.

Ella waved her blue sash at the men, as a way of communicating that she belonged. Rolf had gone off to meet up with Bertie, which meant Ella was alone on the field, and would have to represent herself in a field of men to whom she looked like a young boy.

"Blue team?" Hugo asked as Ella reached their group.

"Allard of Caprese." Ella extended her hand, and tried to grip Hugo's palm firmly.

"Ah, you're one of my top finishers," Hugo said with a smile, clearly recognizing the name.

Ella grinned, relieved that she wouldn't have to explain herself, or worse yet, be forced to try to prove she'd earned the spot if the other men didn't believe her. "That's right. Top twenty-four in swords."

"I heard you beat Raedwald of Nordheim," Hugo continued, eyes sparkling. "He was furious at having a loss so early in, and from someone as young as yourself."

"I'm afraid I've made myself an enemy," Ella said, hoping Hugo would then assure her that Raedwald held no grudges, but would cool off and see it all as fair play.

Instead, Hugo frowned somberly. "I fear you have. And Raedwald's a man of vengeance. You'll have to watch out for him. He's on the red team."

Hugo tipped his head toward the far end of the field, where men with red sashes were gathering. Then he leaned low and spoke to Ella in a quieter voice. "See the two men with him?"

"The burly fellows with the black beards?" Ella spotted the men, both of whom sported chain mail panels similar to that which graced Hugo's armor. Men of means, then—or at least, men who wanted to win badly enough they'd pay large sums

for better armor.

"Yes," Hugo confirmed. "Know them?"

"No."

"Einhard and Uliad of Ulster. They're brothers, and Raedwald's henchmen." Hugo met Ella's eyes, weighing whether she understood.

"Henchmen?" Ella repeated in a faltering voice, almost sure she knew what Hugo meant, but hoping he'd tell her otherwise.

"Raedwald doesn't like to get his hands dirty. When he wants revenge on someone, he has Einhard and Uliad take care of matters. Watch out for them. Many men are injured in the melee, and few questions are ever asked about how or why."

As Hugo finished speaking, another man approached with a blue sash, and Hugo straightened to greet him.

"Thank you for that information," Ella said.

Hugo nodded, but turned his attention to the newcomer.

While men continued to arrive, Ella stayed to the rear of their group, where it would be more difficult for the men on the opposite side to see her, especially given that nearly everyone else was taller than she was. Her family, along with Rolf and Gustav, had taken seats in the tiered benches that flanked the sides of the field.

The foot melee was one of the most popular events, second only to the mounted melee, which would take place later that afternoon in a larger field further from town. Ella and her family had discussed whether she might participate in that event, but the entry fee was higher than for other events, and Ella, having only ever participated in the junior mounted melee before, wasn't convinced her horse would be safe in the rougher competition of the adult category.

She didn't mind putting herself at risk, but she wasn't about to endanger one of the horses simply to indulge her own foolishness.

That left the foot melee as her final event of the day.

Perhaps it was her growing dread that seemed to speed the passage of time, but soon all the men had assembled, and Hugo

gathered his team for a short speech about strategy and bravery, before dismissing the men to line up according to their positions.

"Top finishers, gather round." Hugo held his arms wide, and Ella approached with eight other men (the top finishers being split equally between the two teams in an attempt to make the fight as fair as possible, though not all twenty-four men who finished high at swords had decided to enter the foot melee).

Hugo then assigned each man a spot. He placed Ella three men over from himself on his left side, between two particularly large men, one of whom Ella recognized as a top finalist at swords the day before.

She held out her hand to greet him, and tried to remember his name. "Dominic Ficino? You took second at swords yesterday, am I right?"

"That's me." Dominic shook her hand and squinted down at her. "You're the boy who bested Raedwald in an early round."

"Allard of Caprese." Ella introduced herself. "I'm afraid I've made myself a reputation for that."

"You've made yourself an enemy, is what you've done." Dominic gave her a grim look that may have been tinged with fear on her behalf. He didn't appear to be old, but he had a weathered face, and a trace of something that may have been a scar crept up his cheek from under his brown close-trimmed beard. His armor was simple leather, and looked worn, at that.

"Should I have let him win?" Ella asked.

Dominic laughed heartily. "No, Boy, you did well. There's a lot of us pleased at your win. But I'd keep my distance from the man if I were you."

"That's going to be difficult, since he's about to charge us."

Dominic laughed as though Allard had made a great joke, and tucked his sash through the loop in the left shoulder of his armor, pulling it through to its middle, so that it hung in two equal lengths next to his arm.

Ella had already threaded her sash, and now checked to be sure it was secure in the tight loop. The sash, besides marking the members of each team, also identified whether a man was still in play (unlike the mounted melee, where men could be clearly unhorsed, it was more difficult to tell when a man was down in the foot melee).

Theoretically, members of a melee were to play according to an honor system. If a man was delivered a blow such as would prove injurious in a real battle, he was supposed to pull out his own sash (indicating to other players that he was no longer in play, and should not be attacked) and to see himself out to the sidelines. But in spite of the high priority placed on honor, not all participants interpreted injurious blows the same way, and some tried to stay in play after they should have rightfully been out.

The sash, then, provided a way for opponents to clearly and unquestionably eliminate a man from play. The sash could be removed with a sword, by hand, or by any other means players might devise. Once it was gone, that man was out, and among the final men standing once the entire defeated team was eliminated, winners of the melee were determined according to which players collected the most sashes from their opponents.

While they were taking their places, a herald strode to the center of the field, bellowing in his loudest voice to remind the men of the rules, which were mostly about not actually trying to injure or kill anyone, and removing oneself honorably when rightfully out.

As soon as he was done, the herald fled from the field.

The blare of a trumpet pierced the air, and the men surged forward in a wave.

Every man had his own preferred strategy at the start. Some liked to hang back just behind the first bout of those who rushed forward. Ella had long before learned that her best hope of getting sashes from her opponents lay in rushing forward and plucking what she liked to call the "easy pickings," before the least-skilled players were eliminated.

But that was when she was fighting against boys, most of

whom, for the last year or two at least, had been younger than she was. Now she was fighting men, and as she extended her sword in an attempt to pluck a sash, she found that, not only was her jab blocked, but she had to dance backward or risk having her own sash plucked.

The realization hit her with jarring force, traveling through her the same way the vibrations from a ringing block traveled up her arm, and it was all she could do, for several moments, to avoid the blows that seemed to be raining down on her from all directions.

"Stay under me, Kid," Dominic advised with a grunt, towering over her as he used his blade to push back a leaping swordsman. "You're short. Stay low, keep your head down, and they won't be able to reach your sash."

Ella was barely able to hear him over the clash of swords and the sounds of struggle (even without hooves, the foot melee was nearly as loud as the mounted), but she immediately recognized the sense of what he was saying. She ducked low and maneuvered herself to a position slightly behind the accomplished swordsman.

There, she wasn't under such constant attack. It was unlikely she'd manage to capture any sashes, but she would at least have a better chance of staying in play. Even if she captured no sashes, she wanted to be among the undefeated on the winning team.

While all of this was going on below, I flew higher, partly to get a better view of the action, but mostly, to stay well out of range of the fighting.

For several long minutes, the scene below me was a chaotic jumble of grunting men and clashing swords, the sounds of battle all but drowned out by the fans who screamed from the sidelines for their favorite players.

I spotted Raedwald, who was not far from the black-bearded brothers, Einhard and Uliad. The three of them were caught up in intense fighting further down the line, to Hugo's right, with a couple dozen men or more between them and Ella.

But as the battle waged on, and the stink of sweat mingled

with the scents of leather and freshly-disturbed earth, which was soon tinged with the distinct smell of blood, I looked down, and saw a man clutching his shoulder, which had been sliced open through his leather armor.

Raedwald grabbed the injured man's sash as he staggered toward the sidelines, blood seeping between his fingers as he tried to contain the wound.

I buzzed like an angry bee in the sky, but there wasn't anything I could realistically do that would help the injured man, or punish Raedwald for stealing the sash of a man he hadn't personally eliminated.

Besides, the man with the bleeding shoulder wasn't the only one leaving the field. Red and blue sashes fluttered as they were plucked from their loops, and eliminated players left the field—some fleeing quickly to avoid any further chance of injury, others trudging from exhaustion.

Unlike the sword competitions, which were fixed at three minutes long, the melee would go on indefinitely, until one side had no more men standing.

Even from my vantage point in the sky, it was difficult to tell which side had the most men, since some of the sashes I saw had been claimed as prizes, and everyone below was constantly in motion, swords flashing in the sunlight. I kept my attention divided between Ella and Raedwald as the swarm below slowly thinned.

Raedwald did not go out. One of the Ulster brothers (I've no idea which one was Einhard and which Uliad) had his sash stolen, but the other remained in.

As did Ella. And Dominic. And Hugo.

Then Dominic was hit by a horizontal blow to his right side while he fought another man on his left. He ran off the field before anyone could claim his sash.

This left Ella fighting essentially alone. She'd clapped Dominic's attacker across the back with her blade at almost the same instant he took out Dominic, but the red-sashed fighter didn't leave the field. This meant she had to fight that man and another, which might sound overwhelming, but Gustav had

often joined in practice when she fought her brother, so she was used to blocking two swords at once, and used her small shield to great advantage.

To her benefit, the thinning field provided more space for proper sword-fighting, unlike the initial mad fray, which had left little room to maneuver. Off to her right, Hugo took out another red-sashed swordsman, and then turned his attention on to trying to capture the sash of one of the men who were attacking Ella.

This eased the pressure on Ella momentarily. But across the field, Raedwald and the remaining Ulster brother teamed up to pick off another member of the blue team.

They then turned their attention toward Hugo and Ella.

With Dominic and so many others eliminated, the sea of swordsmen that had blocked Ella from their view was now thinned considerably. I watched from above as Raedwald and his henchman sent each other a knowing glance, then went bounding straight past a cluster of fighters, toward Hugo and Ella.

Skullduggering snollygasters!

I whipped down from the sky, mindless of the danger, to warn Ella. Her hood was tight and I didn't want to block her view for even a fraction of a second (as that kind of advantage would be all her opponent might need to defeat her), but I squeezed in near her ear, shouted that Raedwald was on his way, and flew back out in time to watch Hugo disarm the man who'd defeated Dominic.

Being disarmed was nearly as obvious an eliminating factor as having one's sash plucked, but the man appeared ready to grab his sword again, when Ella, who'd seen everything, dropped her shield and picked up the other man's sword by the handle.

This was good timing on everyone's part, because Ella needed both swords to fight off both the man she was already battling, and Raedwald, who'd just arrived.

Hugo was likewise freed up just as the Ulster brother barreled toward him, his sword moving in a powerful

downward slice toward Hugo's head.

Hugo blocked the blow, but the force of it bent him low.

Ella whipped her right-hand sword around, blocking a strike from Raedwald and pushing the Ulster brother back. With her left hand, she flicked the other sword at the sash on the chest of the man she'd been fighting the longest. He was either exhausted, disoriented by her sudden change of hands, or lulled into a false sense of security by the fact that she was fighting three men at once. Whatever the cause of it, his reaction was slow, and though he jumped back, it was not until Ella's sword grazed his chest and caught his sash.

His jumping back therefore pulled the sash almost free of its loop. Had she been able to give her full attention to the matter, Ella could have flicked her wrist and pulled the sash completely free, but she was quite distracted by a number of things happening to her right.

One was that the Ulster brother had swung another downward blow at Hugo, which sent the blue-sashed swordsman into a bowing sort of crouch. Ella might have wondered why Hugo's opponent was repeating the move, but she saw where he was looking, and the malicious glimmer in his eyes.

Hugo's neck was exposed.

The way he stood at a crouch, sword above his head to block the strike from above, Hugo had to throw his head back, craning his neck to allow him to keep his eyes on his opponent. His body armor and helmet were not of one piece, and though leather and chain mail typically overlapped enough to cover every gap, in his current position, and owing possibly to the fact that he'd grown some since the armor had first been made to fit him, there was an exposed gap of neck, and a major blood vessel clearly visible through his skin.

If he was struck in that position, even by a blunted blade, it would cut the vessel easily, and he would die.

Ella saw all this in an instant, but in that same instant, Raedwald saw it, too.

Her initial opponent was frantically trying to stuff his sash

back through its loop. Though Ella could easily have taken it from him at that moment, she took advantage of his distraction to turn her attention to keeping Hugo safe from Raedwald and his henchman.

Raedwald raised his sword to strike Hugo, who the Ulster brother held at an impasse, swords crossed, each man pushing with all his strength in an attempt to force the other back.

Ella whipped her sword around quickly, catching Raedwald in his exposed side, but he ignored her as he brought his sword down toward Hugo's neck.

With only the tiniest of a fraction of a second left in which to act, and having seen Raedwald was bent on his purpose and would not be stopped, and knowing that even if she got one of her swords between Hugo and Raedwald's blade, the force of his blow would simply send her sword into Hugo's neck, Ella threw herself onto Hugo's back, sending him crumpling to the ground.

Raedwald's blow came down—hard—on her back.

Chapter Seven

A trumpet sounded from the sidelines, and officials rushed the field. The few men who remained on the field stopped fighting and looked to see why they'd been interrupted before one side was completely eliminated.

I hovered above, watching everything.

Below me was a screaming din, each man trying to shout down the others. Members of the crowd were shouting, too, though many of them had fallen into a hush, hoping to hear the verdict.

Ella rolled off Hugo's back and tried to ask him if he was hurt, but he was stunned and red-faced, either from anger or embarrassment or simply the effort of the fight that had passed, I'm not sure. But it wasn't as though the two of them could have had a conversation, not with the way the officials were shouting, and the Ulster brothers and Raedwald yelling back. Even the heralds had gathered around, though they stood out of reach of the swords.

Twice I thought Raedwald might turn his sword on the officials. While three of them tried to shout him down, another jabbed his finger at the sash of the man Ella had fought, whose sash she'd nearly taken with her sword. They pronounced him fairly eliminated, and sent him to the sidelines.

He looked as though he wanted to protest, but once he'd caught sight of the others gathered around him, outnumbering him by a great margin, he pulled out the sash himself, handed it to the official, and trotted off the field.

While that was going on, Ella got to her feet, wincing with the pain in her back from Raedwald's blow. She offered Hugo her hand in an effort to help him up.

He took it, though he didn't look happy about it. Once he'd reached his feet and stepped away from the uproar far enough that he could be heard, he asked Ella, "Why did you land on my

back?"

"Your neck was exposed," Ella explained, though she feared he might not believe her. "Raedwald saw the opening and was going to strike. He had this look in his eyes. It was greedy…" She tried to think of a word that would explain it. "Bloodthirsty, even. I think he meant to kill you. I struck him in the side with my sword, but he didn't stop, and there wasn't time for anything else."

"So you threw yourself on top of me?"

"Yes." Ella hung her head, and winced again as even that small motion sent stabbing pain shooting up her spine.

"Are you injured?" Hugo looked suddenly concerned.

Ella, fearing she'd be thought weak or feeble, shook her head. "I'm fine. It's nothing. Not a scratch. Raedwald's sword came down on my back. My armor protected me." In fact, her armor had extra padding which her mother had sewn in under the leather to disguise her feminine figure, but even that had been little help against the force of Raedwald's angry blow.

"You took the hit intended for me?" Hugo realized aloud.

But an official was already approaching them. It was the man who'd taken the red sash from Ella's earlier opponent. He held it out to her. "This is rightfully yours."

Ella looked around, bewildered. "I don't—I didn't—"

"You pulled it free with your sword."

Realizing where the sash must have come from, she shook her head. "Not completely."

"You struck him fair on the chest. That alone should have eliminated him. Since he stayed in dishonorably, the sash is yours." The official shoved the sash into her hands and cleared his throat, turning to point toward where Raedwald and the Ulster brother were still trying to shout down three officials and two heralds.

"Now, about this other activity," the official continued. "We saw clearly what happened. Everyone did. Raedwald's out because you struck him in the side."

"He also caught me across the back," Ella admitted.

"Being already out at that time, his blow does not count.

Now." The official cleared his throat again, and this time began to look rather uncomfortable. He gestured to the two of them to step back from the shouting match. They picked their way through the battle-pocked turf to an area in the midst of the green where it would be difficult to overhear.

"I'm not the head judge, so I can't give the final ruling, but from what I saw, and in light of what everyone knows about Raedwald and Einhard." The official paused and looked long at Hugo.

Hugo frowned, then arched one eyebrow upward in question.

The official took a deep breath and turned to Ella. "Why did you throw yourself onto Hugo's back?"

"Raedwald's blow was headed for his neck. There was a gap between his pieces of armor, and nothing to cover it. His neck was exposed. Even a light strike would kill him, and given the force and angle of that blow, it might well have cut off his head."

Hugo's eyes flashed with sudden fury, and he glared in Raedwald's direction. For a moment, he appeared to be about to stomp over to exchange words with Raedwald, but instead, he looked at the official.

"Is that what you saw, too?"

"That's what I saw," the official confirmed. He flicked a finger in the direction of one side of the field, where furious fans were still screaming, some of the accusations loud enough to be heard over the rest of the din. "From the sound of it, that's what a lot of people saw."

Hugo clenched his jaw, then shook his head, relaxing his expression slightly. "It's the risk I take when I choose to compete."

"And Raedwald knows it," the official added. "I'm going to speak with the others. Stay here." The man trotted off, leaving Hugo and Ella alone.

"I thought Raedwald hated *me*," Ella said in her deepest voice, confused by the heir's choice of target.

"He hates me more," Hugo informed her grimly.

"What did you do to him?"

"Don't you know?"

"I've no idea. I've been competing in junior tournaments in the east all these years. I've never competed in this district or this division, and I'm not familiar with hardly any of the competitors."

"But you're from Caprese? That's part of this kingdom."

"Yes." Ella was impressed that Hugo had heard of their estate and knew which kingdom it belonged to. She, on the other hand, had no idea where Adalaard was.

Hugo continued, "And you don't know what I did to upset Raedwald?"

"I have been on the road for most of the last five years."

"Our feud goes back much further than that."

"He really knows how to hold a grudge. But what could you have done, then? You're not old enough to—"

"I'm seventeen," Hugo inserted, flashing a look that said his age ought to give her some sort of clue.

Ella looked at him, trying to figure him out, distracted because her heart kept doing strange flip-flops, which she attributed to being at the center of a protested melee result, though she'd been involved with those before without her stomach somersaulting. Their official headed back toward them, and Ella shrugged. "I still don't know what you did."

"I was born," Hugo answered quietly just as the official reached them.

"That's it, then," the official announced. "Raedwald's been suspended from all tournament competition for the next two months on grounds of insolence toward officials following dishonorable behavior. The blue team has been awarded the victory. As far as his attempt to kill you—"

"He denies everything," Hugo guessed.

"As always," the official confirmed with a look of apology.

Hugo clapped the man on the shoulder with gratitude, and began walking with him toward the sidelines. "You've given me two months of competing without having to worry about him. That's a gift I won't squander."

Everyone had begun to leave the field, so Ella hurried over to where she'd last seen her family.

Nora, of course, was beside herself with concern, and fussed over Ella, who insisted she'd be fine. Gustav, Bertie, and Robert were buzzing about whether Raedwald hadn't been about to kill the man she'd fallen on, and Ella confirmed their suspicions, adding that the official had testified as much, though it didn't seem there was anything to be done about it legally, since deaths weren't uncommon in the melee, and it was a risk all players accepted.

The mention of this sent Nora into another fit of fussing, which Ella mostly ignored as Rolf came bounding toward them, his face flushed with excitement.

"Do you know who that was?" Rolf asked Ella.

"Who? Hugo?" Ella wasn't sure which man Rolf was referring to.

"Hugo." Rolf dragged out the name, nodding knowingly.

"Hugo of Adalaard." Ella tried not to blush when she said his full name, though she couldn't think why her instinct was to blush. Perhaps because she'd saved his life, and he'd been so nice about it.

"What did you think of Hugo?" Rolf asked slowly, his eyebrows dancing.

Ella studied her friend and felt herself blushing red in spite of her efforts.

"Oh, you do know who he is, don't you?" Rolf accused.

"I don't have the foggiest idea who he is," Ella protested, perhaps a bit too loudly.

Hugo had been approaching their group from behind her, and caught what she said. "You don't know who *who* is?"

Rolf's mouth fell open, and he worked his jaw silently for several seconds while he gasped for breath.

Ella ignored Rolf. They'd been friends for years and his behavior, though a bit odd, wasn't entirely unusual given his personality. She instead quickly introduced her parents, Gustav, and Bertie. "This is Hugo of Adalaard," she told them.

"Hugo of Adalaard?" Gustav repeated the name with a

knowing grin. "I know who he is." He began to bow.

"None of that now," Hugo insisted, grabbing Gustav by the arm and hoisting him back upright.

"But you're—" Gustav began to protest.

"Hugo of Adalaard," Hugo insisted, with an air of strict finality. "That's all." He turned back to Ella. "I'm glad I caught you—"

But Rolf was nearly hyperventilating, and, as was his tendency even when he wasn't overexcited, he cut into the conversation. "He's Prince Henry."

"Shh!" Henry tried to shush Rolf, who fortunately hadn't spoken so loudly anyone outside their circle could hear.

But Ella had heard, and in an instant of stunned insight, believed what would otherwise seem like a wild claim, because it explained exactly why Raedwald would want to kill Hugo just for being born. She bent at the knees, dropping into a curtsy.

But Henry caught her arm and tugged her up, too. "No bowing. No. Bowing. I'm Hugo of Adalaard. That's all."

"But you're really—" Ella began.

"He's really Prince Henry," Rolf confirmed, still excited.

Ella's knees buckled again.

Henry hoisted her up a bit higher this time. "I'm no different than I was one minute ago, before you knew, so I don't expect to be treated any differently." He set her on her feet and shot a glare at Rolf to silence him (which was good timing, because Rolf looked as though he was going to reveal his identity again).

Henry turned back to Ella and spoke quickly, before he could be interrupted. "I appreciate what you did for me out there, even more so since it seems you didn't even know who I was at the time." He cocked his head to the side thoughtfully, then asked. "Would you do the same now, knowing who I am?"

"Of course," Ella answered, without hesitation.

Henry grinned. "Good. I could use an ally in the melee." His voice took on a serious tone, and he looked earnestly into her eyes. "I'll be traveling west on the tournament circuit for

the rest of the season. I'd like you to travel with me."

For an instant, Ella wanted to scream with excitement.

But then she remembered she was supposed to become a handmaid to Madame Augusta De Bouchard that very week. She looked at her parents. They both shook their heads.

Ella closed her eyes and wished the situation could be other than it was. (This wasn't a real wish, mind you—not that my magic was strong enough to change things if it had been.) She bowed her head, unable to look Henry full in the face.

"I'm sorry. I can't. I have responsibilities. Duties. Back home." When she finally dared to look up she saw Henry staring at her with a shocked expression.

"As a member of my party, you'd have all your expenses paid, of course." He blinked at her, waiting a moment to see if his words would sink in.

"That's a very generous offer. I wish I could accept it. Really I do."

Henry looked from Ella to her parents and back again. Then he spoke slowly. "Oftentimes, such a position, if everything proceeds well, leads to knighthood."

Rolf had been staring in shocked silence during their exchange, but now he whispered rather loudly. "Allard, my boy, this is the chance of a lifetime. Take it!"

Ella opened her mouth to speak and felt her chin quiver. "I would love to. But I simply can't." She covered her face with her hands out of fear that her quivering chin might make her look like a girl, and she'd be found out.

But no one expected a girl to be offered a spot fighting at tournaments with the prince, so she needn't have worried about that at the moment.

Robert cleared his throat. "Would it be possible, if Allard's not able to take up your offer right now, for him to join you at a later date?"

Henry looked instantly relieved. "Yes. Yes, of course. Especially if he can join me in about two-months' time. The offer stands, regardless of the passage of time, though I'd prefer his help sooner rather than later." He turned to Ella

again. "You'll consider it?"

Ella wasn't sure what her father was hinting at, but she clung to the tiny bit of hope it offered. "I will. I'll see what I can do to make it possible. I appreciate the offer so very much."

"I appreciate what you did for me today." Henry grinned. "Are you headed to the mounted melee?"

"We need to get home," Robert said.

Henry's grin faded somewhat. "You're sure you can't stay?"

"Allard's back is injured," Nora explained.

"That's right!" Henry recalled, looking immediately concerned. "How bad is it? You should visit the medical tent and have them take a look."

"It's not that bad." Ella tried to make her voice sound deep and authoritative, to end the discussion before she got hauled off to the medical tent and stripped of her armor for inspection.

"It's really not that bad," Nora agreed. "We simply need to get home. It was an honor to meet you." She started to curtsy, but Henry shot her a look, and she straightened immediately.

"Thank you once again for your actions on the field," Henry told Ella sincerely. "I do pray you'll consider my offer. I understand you have places to be, and I need to be on my way as well. It was a pleasure meeting you all."

Having dismissed himself, Henry trotted off.

It wasn't until the prince was out of sight that Rolf regained his ability to speak. "That was—"

"Yes, we know." Robert silenced him. "But we really must claim Allard's prize for the sash, and then hurry to claim our horses, if we're going to reach Caprese before nightfall."

"I'll walk with you," Rolf insisted, hopping and dancing about as he followed them to the table. "You should try the mounted melee," he urged Ella as they stood in the short line for their prize. "You are good at it."

Ella simply shook her head, and Rolf laughed. "I can't believe we were just talking with—" He clapped his hands over his mouth before he could say Prince Henry's name aloud.

Then he laughed so hard, the sound burst from between his hands. "Allard, do you know, when you met him, you were so stunned you nearly curtsied!"

"Shh!" Ella and Bertie shushed him at once.

They'd reached the front of the table. Ella handed the red sash to the men at the table, and gave them her name (technically, Allard's name).

"One sash, winning team, and final three." The herald read off her results from his ledger and gave the amount to the treasurer, who counted out a handful of coins.

Ella thanked him, then promptly gave the coins to her father. Robert had always paid her entry fees, not to mention travel expenses, and the provision of horses, weapons, and armor. She figured she still owed him several more handfuls of prize money, though she wasn't likely to have a chance to earn any more.

They headed for the stables, and Rolf accompanied them there as well. He was calming down slightly, but was still quite talkative, and quickly launched in to an explanation of the history of bad blood between Richard and Henry.

"You know, Richard the third was always jealous that his older brother was going to be king," Rolf explained. "Some say that's why he married so young—in an effort to get an heir before Henry. That's why Richard the fourth is older than his cousin. He was raised to resent both the king and the prince."

"Why doesn't the king do anything about it, if he's king?" Bertie asked.

"What can he do? He doesn't have grounds to imprison him, because Richard's too smart to do anything outright."

"You've got five witnesses who saw Raedwald try to kill Hugo in the melee," Ella noted.

"But that's in the melee," Rolf argued. "Anything can happen in the melee, and everyone knows that. People die. It's a risk you take by participating. It's not the same as outright murder."

"But he did it on purpose," Ella insisted.

"Doesn't matter," Rolf pronounced with finality, and

quickly moved on. "What else could the king do? Send his brother away as an ambassador to other countries, or to fight in distant wars? He's tried that, and do you know what's come of it?"

Gustav, who seemed the next most knowledgeable member of their party concerning royal intrigues, offered an answer. "There are rumors he's conspired with enemies of the kingdom to overthrow Henry."

"What?" Ella hadn't heard these rumors before, but Gustav often gossiped with other travelers while she and Bertie were practicing sword work, so it didn't surprise her that he might know more about political matters.

"That's right!" Rolf agreed, speaking quietly as they approached the stables, since the crowds were thick with men claiming their horses to go to the mounted melee. "Of course there's no proof, only rumor, so what can the king do? It's dangerous to keep his brother here, but possibly more dangerous to send him away. They watch and they wait, and young Henry trains in the tournaments so he can defend himself if his cousin ever challenges him openly. Do you know, that trumpeter had the horn to his lips from the second Raedwald first approached Henry on the field."

"What do you mean?" Ella asked.

"I mean, they were ready to end it if it looked like anything was going to happen. When your sword hit Raedwald, and he didn't halt his blade, the trumpeter blew the horn. He was blowing when the sword struck you. They know things might happen, and they try to stop them from happening, but they can't do anything against Raedwald because he's royalty, so they have to wait for him to act."

They'd reached the line at the stables, and it was far too crowded there to continue their discussion with any semblance of privacy. Rolf parted ways with them, wishing them blessings on their journey home.

The family stayed silent as they gathered their horses. But once they were on the trail home, which was mostly empty, since nearly everyone else had gone to the mounted melee, they

were free to talk.

Questions had been burning inside Ella ever since Henry had asked her to fight with him. One burned brighter than the others, and she asked it first.

"Father, what did you mean when you asked if I might join Hugo at a later date? Do you really think I could?"

Chapter Eight

Robert sighed, but otherwise didn't answer immediately.

"You weren't just putting him off to ease the rejection, were you?" Nora asked.

"Not quite," Robert said, and sighed again before continuing. "There's a lot I haven't told you children about our estate. We don't own much land. It's enough for the horses, but there's no income in it. And I haven't made a great deal of profit these last few years of trading. It's been enough to live on, but we're not well off."

Ella didn't see what this information had to do with her question, but she did find it sobering.

"All that is to say," Robert continued, then sighed, then launched in again, "our estate is not secure. If the king decides to raise taxes again, we could be in a bind. But he said you might become a knight." Robert's voice caught.

Bertie guessed the rest. "Knights aren't subject to the same taxes. Some of them don't pay any taxes at all."

"I could become a knight!" Ella nearly squealed with excitement.

Nora made a frustrated noise with her throat, and looked around to make sure no one was close enough to overhear them (no one was). "It's not possible. You're a girl. It's tricky enough when you need to use the restroom at tournament, always having to use the single latrines. How would you keep yourself hidden at war? And if they found you out, what would happen?"

There was silence as each of them tried to think if they'd ever heard of a similar case.

"There are stiff penalties for passing oneself off as being from a higher class," Gustav noted. "The bigger the gap between the true class and the pretended one, the worse the punishment."

"When I was a girl," Nora began, her voice carrying an

undercurrent of trepidation, "I wanted to get a job working with horses. My father told me then, that a woman who pretended to be a man could be punished by death."

"Death?" Ella questioned. "And yet, you let me compete?"

"I think he may have been exaggerating, or trying to scare me," Nora admitted. "And at any rate, those were different times from these. King Henry is an open-minded man. There's even been some rumor he's asked to allow his daughters to be in line for the throne, ahead of his brother and nephew, but too many oppose the idea. They fear it would upset the entire social order."

"Do you really think Ella could become a knight?" Bertie asked.

"That wasn't quite what I was thinking," Robert confessed. "You see, Bertie, you're just a year younger than Ella. And the two of you have much the same eyes. Different chins, different mouths, but you look the same in the eyes. When you get old enough to grow a beard—"

"I could become Allard!" Bertie squealed with nearly as much excitement as his sister. "I could be a knight!"

"I don't know if it would work," Robert admitted, sighing. "It's a long shot with many risks, many chances of failure, but if Ella could earn you a spot as Allard, and if you could later take her place—"

"The only spot Ella needs to worry about is her position with Madame De Bouchard," Nora reminded them. "She could *marry* a knight. That makes far more sense than trying to become one."

Ella started to protest, but got no further than making a strangled noise in her throat, when Gustav added his input to the discussion.

"I've trained swordsmen for over fifty years," he reminded them all. "Ella's as good as any of them, and better than most. But she can't be a knight. Do any of you know what knights do all day—how they spend their hours, where they sleep, the activities they engage in when they're not fighting with swords? Ella's a great swordsman, but that's the only

qualification she has for being a knight. She'd be found out quickly. She wouldn't last a week."

Ella made another strangled noise with her throat, and Gustav turned to her. "Sorry, Ella. I just don't want to see you get hurt. It's a crazy plan. It's not even a plan. It's a dream."

For the rest of the ride home, Ella was silent. When they reached Caprese, she offered to tend the horses while the others took care of catching up on the other chores.

As Ella brushed down the horses, the tears she'd been holding back began to freely flow.

I took this as my cue, and grew to the size of a field mouse, perching along the horse's mane so I'd be at eye-level with Ella.

She saw me, but kept brushing in silence for a moment before she spoke. "It's not fair."

"It's not," I agreed wholeheartedly.

"I want to be a boy."

"My magic only lasts till midnight," I reminded her softly, "and you've only got three wishes. At most, I could make you a boy for three days. That's not enough to become a knight."

"I know." She sniffled and stepped around the horse to brush down the other side. "That's why I didn't bother wishing it. But what about the glass slippers?"

"Your mother's glass slippers?"

"Yes—the ones she wasted one foolish wish on all those years ago. She showed them to me to warn me against wasting wishes. Her glass slippers are still in her closet. And they're still magic, because they fit only her feet, and no one else's. Even when my feet were the same size as hers. No one else can wear them. They won't let anyone else wear them."

"Oh, hedgeborn huggermugger," I muttered as I considered the question. It stumped me, though of course I knew exactly which glass slippers she meant. "Perhaps, since it was such a simple wish, the slippers stayed. They didn't disappear. Big elaborate wishes take more magic, and don't last. I'm sure there's a law of magic that explains it, but fairies aren't much into laws and details. I don't even know who to ask. But you

don't really want to be a boy, do you?"

"I want to be a knight!" She stopped brushing and leaned against the horse, half hugging him. "The prince gave me an opportunity that any of the men on that field would have killed to have. Some of them probably have killed in hopes of achieving it. And I turned him down. Did you see his face when I turned him down? He couldn't imagine any reason why anyone in their right mind would turn down that opportunity, and I couldn't even explain to him why I did."

"Ella?" Nora's voice echoed down the barn.

"Yes, Mother. I'm still brushing down the horses. I'll be in shortly," Ella called back.

"I heard what you said." Nora's voice sounded louder as she drew closer to us. "And I'm sorry, but I think part of your frustration comes from wanting something that cannot be."

"That's one way of putting it, I guess," Ella agreed.

"I understand how you feel," Nora continued, "Because I felt the same way when I was your age, and for years after."

"You wanted to be a knight?"

"No, not properly. But I wanted to be a horseman. That's all I cared about. Horses. But I couldn't have a career working with them because I'm not a man. And I couldn't inherit this estate because I'm not a man. And I felt as though I was about to lose everything I cared about, without ever grasping what I really wanted."

Ella sniffled. She'd heard all this story before, more or less, but never quite from that perspective. "So how did you get over it?"

"I stopped wanting what I couldn't have. I married your father and settled down, and we've been quite happy."

"But you at least got Arabian horses out of the deal. What am I supposed to do? What? Do you think I should marry a knight?"

"Perhaps." Nora took her daughter's hand where it rested on the horse's back.

"I'm fourteen. I'm not ready to marry."

"Sometimes," Nora said as she squeezed Ella's hand,

"we've got to let go of what we think we want, and take joy in what's been given to us. In that way, we often find that what we really want has been right in front of us all along."

Ella drew in a deep breath. "What's in front of me, is that I need to muck out the barn. And then…I guess I need to finish packing to go to Madame De Bouchard's."

"That's my girl," Nora squeezed Ella's hand one last time before letting go.

"But mother?" Ella added.

"Yes?"

"I really wanted to go to tournament with Henry. I mean, I really, really wanted to."

"I'm sorry, Ella. It's time you learned to be a lady."

*

Ella traveled to the De Bouchard estate the following afternoon. By horse, the ride would have taken under an hour, even at a moderate pace. But since Ella had her wardrobe to transport, and since Madame Augusta De Bouchard had strict standards regarding what was appropriate, the family traveled by carriage, which took a couple of hours.

Madame Augusta lived in a large house on a small estate not far from a village. The carriage splashed up the lane, which had once been smooth and wide, gracefully shaded by rows of trees, but had long before become overgrown, so that hardly any sunlight reached the road. The road was bumpy with potholes—some of them so deep with rainwater, they had tadpoles swimming in them—and the carriage lurched so badly, Ella asked to get out and walk.

This seemingly innocent question led to a long lecture from her mother about appropriate lady-like behavior. "Part of the reason I've chosen to send you to Madame De Bouchard is that she has very high standards. We've let you run nearly wild, and you need the kind of overcorrection Madame Augusta can provide. You need to learn to become a lady. Being a lady means acting like one, even when the carriage lurches."

By the time Nora finished her long speech, Ella's stomach had begun to lurch along with the carriage, and she feared she

might vomit if she opened her mouth, so instead she nodded meekly and remained silent.

The carriage slowed as they rounded the last bend in the lane before reaching the house. Ella craned her neck to get a better view of the mansion, which sat glumly atop a hill, its thatch roof shaggy and moldering.

Ella could see that the house had once been lavish and ornate, but it was in dire need of nearly every possible attention. The roof almost certainly leaked. Most of the windows were shuttered closed, and those that were open held no glass. Everything that could be painted was in need of being painted again; stones had fallen from the chimneys and walls, and needed to be mortared back into place.

"Hmm," Nora whispered, her face showing traces of disappointment in spite of her forced smile. "It's not as impressive as it once was, but as we all know, Madame Augusta's husband has not been well for several years. I'm sure with a bit of attention—"

The front door opened, and Nora fell silent.

As the carriage came to a full stop, a cluster of peacock feathers emerged near the top of the doorway, followed by a hat of bright peacock green (the feathers, it turned out, were stuck in the hat). Under the hat, a bony woman in a peacock-green gown stepped into what, moments before, had been a beam of sunshine.

But the clouds had covered the sun, and the woman walked, instead, through gloom.

She was followed by two other feathered hats, neither quite as impressive as the wide eyes that nodded from atop the peacock feathers. One wore a gown of yellow-green, the other brownish-rose.

Behind them came two more girls, these in simple cotton gowns. Whereas the first three held their heads high, so that anyone might see up their nostrils, the latter girls looked downward, barely lifting their eyes at the newcomers.

These five females formed a line from the door, halfway to the carriage.

Robert jumped down from the driver's seat and came around to help Nora and Ella down. Under any other circumstances, neither Nora nor Ella would have wanted any help, but, as Nora had ardently explained to Ella ahead of time, it was only proper they have help.

Even if that help was completely unnecessary.

Nora had also given Ella instruction on proper introductions, which was why Ella knew to follow her mother half a step behind and a bit to her right, to offer a deep curtsy to Madame De Bouchard when introduced, to likewise curtsy (but not as deeply) to her two daughters, Agatha and Bertha (who were one and two years older than Ella), and to simply nod her head to the two ladies-in-waiting, Cecile and Helene, who would be her peers.

Then Madame Augusta invited them inside for tea. Once inside, she asked Ella to serve.

It was a test, obviously. One of many that she would be asked to perform. With the help of Cecile and Helene, Ella was able to get through without any major mishap, but Madame's eyes were on her the entire time, her mouth a sneer so ingrained, the woman's wrinkles showed the expression even when her face was at rest.

Once Ella had served, Augusta asked her to sit—then proceeded to point out every possible detail—from the fold of the napkins to spilt grains of sugar—that Ella had done wrong.

Augusta's message was clear: Ella was not yet a lady, and the Madame knew what she needed to do to become one.

The rest of their conversation was very nearly as painful, and I'd give it all to you word-for-word, but I won't repeat such hogwash humblebrag, nor would anyone care to read it.

When tea was over Ella was told to clean up with help from Cecile and Helene. She fled to the kitchen, relieved to be away from the woman and her ridiculous standards.

"What does it matter which way the napkins land on people's laps?" Ella asked the other two girls in a whisper.

Rather than sympathizing with her, or giggling as she might have hoped, Ella got lectures from them on the proper

way, along with horror stories of the times they got things wrong. In their own ways, the girls were trying to warn her—to protect her from making the same mistakes they'd made before.

But their words carried another message, one they hadn't intended. They told Ella that she didn't belong there—in that house, or in that world. She hadn't wanted to come, but now, she wanted even more desperately to leave.

And yet, when she finished in the kitchen and returned to the others, she found her parents had already gone.

"They've left without saying goodbye?" Ella wondered aloud, hurt and mystified, because her parents had never parted ways with her without hugs and assurances, before.

"I thought it best," Augusta said briskly. "Now, your luggage is waiting in the drive. Bring it in and we'll have a look."

Ella was confused by the Madame's instructions, but since the woman had already shown herself to be impatient and demanding, Ella hurried to obey. She carried the bags inside.

"Set them down," Augusta ordered.

Ella began to lower them onto the table.

"Not there! You'll scratch the wood!"

Ella bent down to place them instead on the floor.

"Not on the floor—you'll get everything filthy. Have you no standards? What kind of idiot have they sent me? The chairs are fine, just set them down!"

Ella placed the bags on chairs, still puzzled by what this was all about. She'd traveled extensively in various cultures, and stayed at inns across two continents, so she understood that people did things differently everywhere. She'd expected to be asked to take the bags to her room to unpack, but supposed Madame De Bouchard wanted to see what she had for clothes, perhaps so she could advise her in the future about what would be most appropriate to wear for upcoming occasions.

Why Agatha and Bertha had to watch, Ella wasn't sure.

But when Madame had her remove her dresses one-by-one from the bags, and hold them up for all to see, the girls inspected them, criticized them, and then began placing them in

two different piles on the table.

This was also rather confusing, as the two piles held similar items of clothing, and each girl claimed a pile. They became positively irate with one another when Ella produced a pink gown. Both Agatha and Bertha wanted it for her own pile.

It was about that time Ella began to wonder what the girls were really doing.

Were they claiming her clothes? For themselves?

It seemed an absurd idea. She was slimmer than either of them, and the dresses would have to be taken out to fit (but then, Augusta had inspected the inner seams, and approved heartily of the extra fabric inside). Still, the more the girls talked, the more Ella became convinced the De Bouchard daughters intended to keep all her clothes.

When the bags were empty of all but her simple cotton work dresses, Madame Augusta told Ella to stop. "Take Agatha's clothes to her suite, and Bertha's to hers."

"But, they're my dresses," Ella protested. "My mother made them for—"

Before Ella could finish her sentence, Madame Augusta struck her with a slap across her cheek, hitting her with such force, she heard ringing in her ears.

Through the ringing, Augusta's voice carried like the cry of a demon. "Insolent child! Never question what you are told! Take the dresses to the girls' suites, and then you may muck out the horse stalls!"

Tears stung Ella's eyes, but she blinked them back, too proud to let them fall.

She'd done nothing wrong. The dresses were hers—her mother had made them to fit her exactly. But what could she do? Even if she fled to the stables, stole a horse, and rode home, she'd only bring dishonor to the family, and likely be sent back to apologize.

Perhaps it was a test. Surely her clothes would be returned to her once she proved herself to be an obedient handmaid.

Ella scooped up the first pile of dresses.

"Those are mine," Agatha said, glaring at her with icy eyes.

"Bring them to my room. This way."

Ella followed, and heard Madame Augusta issuing orders to Cecile and Helene to follow her up, to put the clothes away properly.

When Ella returned downstairs, she scooped up the other pile, and carried them to Bertha's room.

Then she went back down for the rest of her things, hurrying out of fear that Madame might do something terrible, and take them away from her, too.

Indeed, when she reached the room, Augusta held one of the dresses near the window. She appeared to be inspecting the stitching.

"What do you want?" Madame screeched when Ella entered the room.

"I came to take my things to my room," Ella replied in a voice she hoped would not sound insolent, and added a deep curtsy, partly for effect, and partly because Madame Augusta stood so rigidly tall, laced as she was in a tight corset, Ella half expected she wouldn't be able to bend over to slap her, as long as she herself stayed low.

"Your room is in the attic. Top floor. You'll share the space with Cecile and Helene."

Ella started to turn toward her bags, but Madame nearly screamed.

"Don't turn away from me when I'm speaking!"

Ella turned back promptly, and bowed again for good measure. "Yes, Madame."

"Go muck out the stables. The cows are also in need of milking, and if you see anything else that needs done, do it. Then you may take your things upstairs."

"Yes, Madame." Ella curtsied again, then hesitated, unsure if she was actually dismissed, or if she was going to be screamed at again if she stepped away.

"What are you waiting for?" Madame Augusta screeched. "Go! Get on."

And as Ella fled the room, she heard Augusta mutter, "Idiot."

Chapter Nine

Ella wasn't exactly sure where to find the De Bouchard stables, but earlier, when she had been in the kitchen, at the back of the house, she'd noticed a door that led outside. Now she went through the door.

The day was still cloudy, and getting on toward evening. The area had seen rain several times in recent days, and the rear gardens, where they weren't overgrown with weeds, were mostly mud and puddles.

Since she was still wearing her new visiting dress, and since she doubted there was any way she could reach the barn without getting muddy (not to mention mucking out the barn without being soiled by muck) she took off her outer dress and draped it across the back of a chair in the kitchen. Fashions of the day being what they were, she still had on an under-layer of less formal clothing, which would not be so terribly spoilt by mud and muck.

There were several pairs of wooden overshoes by the back door, all of them crusted with mud already. Ella's feet were too small to stay in any of them when she removed her leather slippers, so she kept the slippers on, shoved her feet in the overshoes, and hurried back outside to see what she would find.

As Ella followed the pathway through the weed-filled garden, the plants began to thin, until Ella could see past them to the outbuildings.

There was a chicken coop nearest the house, though Ella didn't see any chickens near it. She'd passed a few on her walk through the garden. Those animals had been scrawny, their feathers patchy—which meant they were either molting, or infested with lice or mites. This saddened Ella because, though horses were her favorite animal, she'd always enjoyed the chickens at Caprese, and had given them all pet names.

The chickens at Caprese were all fat and healthy, but these clearly had been neglected.

Beyond the chicken house, down the muddy path, sat a much bigger building, its roof in even poorer repair than those of the house and chicken coop. She might have thought the building abandoned, but since there weren't any other buildings in sight, and it was the largest, and shaped like most other barns, Ella was forced to assume she'd find the stables inside.

She began to approach the building, picking her way around the soupiest puddles of mud, when she heard growling, and looked over to see a large dog lying on a knob of grass. He was watching her, head low, baring his teeth, growling.

"It's fine," she informed the dog. "I'm going to the barn. I'm okay. Stay."

Up until the moment she said "Stay," the dog had been growling and baring his teeth. But with that word, the dog whimpered and ducked his head.

Ella hurried past, reaching the barn and pulling the heavy door open carefully, as it wobbled unsteadily on aged hinges.

The smell hit her first. She was used to barn smells—the sweet scent of hay, the smells of horses and their manure. But this barn smelt heavily of manure and mold. To her surprise, as her eyes adjusted to the darkness inside, she saw large shapes moving inside.

"What are you doing in here today?" She asked as she approached the nearest horse—or, more accurately, the horse approached her. "Shouldn't you be out to pasture? Has no one let you out?"

The mare whinnied and nodded her head, as though in answer to Ella's question. Five more horses and a couple of cows followed the first animal outside, and Ella was surprised by how thin the horses looked. At least two of them had open wounds that needed attention, and all of them had overgrown hooves. The sight of them nearly broke her horse-loving heart.

"I'm not sure what Madame De Bouchard is going to teach me, but I think there are a few lessons I could teach her," Ella said to herself as the animals went past, clearly eager to find a place to graze.

Ella found a pitchfork and the muck wagon. Both were

next to a large pile of old muck, which had clearly been rained on, possibly several times, since it was dumped there—a strong indicator that no one had mucked the stalls in at least a day or two.

Not that Ella was surprised at all by that point.

Her experience inside the barn confirmed her suspicions. The straw—what there was of it—was filthy.

The only slightly-positive discovery was that there was, at least, a trough of water inside, though what little water was left was mostly a skin of algae.

Given the smell, Ella decided to muck the stalls first, then deal with the water trough.

She scooped the dirty straw quickly, knowing there were more tasks ahead of her than she had hours of daylight left to complete. When she finally got all of the dirty straw removed, the only "fresh" straw she could find was up in the loft, under gaps and holes in the roof, so that it was soaking wet and moldy. She could see a few spots where others had tried to pull out the least moldy, not-as-wet straw, but even that was far worse than anything she ever would have considered using as bedding for her horses at home.

This left her in a quandary. The project had already taken longer than the same task would have taken her at Caprese, and she feared Madame Augusta would be furious if she took too long. But there was no easy way around it. She needed to put fresh straw in the horse stalls—fresh, not moldy.

While Ella was rooting in the loft amongst the straw, I had been flying around investigating things, and so I was the one who first spotted the scythe. Dark as the barn was, in order to see anything, I had turned up my glow and let myself grow to about the size of an apple.

Fairies are useful for more things than just magic and mischief.

The scythe was hanging on the barn wall among a few other tools. I quickly flew back to Ella. "There's a scythe on the wall. You could cut straw," I told her.

Ella didn't hesitate, but clambered back down from the loft,

followed my light to the scythe, took it down, and inspected it.

"Rusty," she announced, running her fingers over the blade made lumpy by moisture and oxidation. "Don't they even know to oil their tools? I understand her husband's been sick for some time, but this wouldn't have rusted if it had been properly cared for. I can't cut straw with this. Do you suppose there's a grinding stone?"

It took some looking, but I spotted a grinding stone under, of all things, a saddle.

"I don't have time to do it properly. The sun will go down on me, and Madame will throw a fit. She's already taken all my fine clothes. Who knows what she'll do if she becomes upset?" Ella tackled the project with effort and got the worst of the rust scraped free, so the blade had enough sharpness to cut, though it wasn't pretty.

She tossed the scythe in the cart, hauled it outside to a field, and swung the scythe with great speed to cut just enough straw to make decent beds for the horses (which was more than what they'd had previously). She made up their stalls before scraping the algae from the trough and filling it with fresh water from the garden cistern.

She'd only gotten it halfway filled when Helene appeared in the doorway, leading the horses back to the barn. "Madame is angry with you."

"Because I'm taking too long?" Ella guessed.

"Because you let the animals into the garden, and for hiding out. She has jobs for you inside."

Ella could have protested and pointed out that the pasture was over-grazed already, and the garden so overgrown, the animals could only have helped it. But she didn't argue, only ran back to the house, where she found Cecile in the kitchen, and her visiting dress gone from the chair.

Cecile nearly screamed at the sight of her. "Don't go any further until you've washed—not unless you want a beating."

So Ella washed as best she could, but it wasn't enough to assuage Madame's anger. As she tried to slip into the front room to gather her things in hopes of taking them up to the

attic, Madame cornered her, raging about the garden, accusing Ella of being purposefully destructive and lazy.

Ella could see there was no sense speaking to the woman, and tried to duck past her.

When Madame had slapped her earlier that day, Ella had not seen the blow coming. No one had ever slapped her before. But this time, when Augusta extended her hand, Ella lifted her arm, blocking the blow with her forearm.

"Insolent Beast!" Madame Augusta screamed, but did not come after her.

Ella escaped to the stairs. Helene met her in the second floor corridor and led her to the attic.

Over the coming weeks, Helene and Cecile helped Ella, and Ella protected them as well as she could, not just from Madame Augusta's anger, but particularly from her physical violence. In this way, her tournament background was advantageous.

But Madame De Bouchard did not follow the same kind of rules as tournament fighters. There were no judges, nor any gonging bell to signal the end of the round. Ella knew the woman was always there, watching, sometimes waiting for her around a dark corridor, simmering in angry resentment.

I learned to play watchman for Ella, flying always ahead of her, out of sight, darting back time and again to warn her when Madame or one of her daughters lurked ahead. Still, I did not dare let myself be seen for fear the cantankerous cadaver would catch me in a brass lamp and keep me as a genie (I don't know for certain that's how it works, but I would take no chances where the jackanapes jennet was concerned).

Ella did her best never to hurt anyone, not even Madame, though she did give the woman quite a bruise once as she used her elbow to prevent Augusta from clubbing Cecile with a shoe horn.

In spite of Ella's best efforts to protect them, Helene and Cecile didn't stay long. None of the handmaids ever lasted more than a few months, except Ella. Even then, she wanted to leave, but she knew the animals would only be neglected again

if she wasn't there to take care of them. Under her care, the horses had filled out, the chickens had grown healthy, and even the dog stopped growling whenever Ella walked by (he still growled at Madame and her daughters, but they rarely went anywhere near him).

Ella was, essentially, a servant—and not a very well-treated one.

I suppose I could tell you everything that went on during Ella's time at Madame De Bouchard's, but most of it was awful and I prefer not to think about it, nor is it particularly entertaining, so I'll simply fill you in on the most important things that happened.

After her first couple of nights in the leaky attic, Ella realized she'd have to fix the roof or resign herself to living in mold, which she was not willing to do. So she undertook every step of the dangerous project.

She had to cut the thatch herself and install it on the slippery roof without falling through any of the weak spots. She'd helped her father with the job at their house before, so she knew how to do it properly so it would last and not leak.

Her work seemed to almost please Madame De Bouchard, and best of all, it gave Ella an excuse to stay out of the house.

No amount of mud, muck, or moldy straw could be as awful as spending time in the presence of Madame De Bouchard and her two spoiled daughters. Ella took over care of the animals, the buildings, and the gardens. She even filled in the potholes on the long driveway, though it was heavy work, and she had to haul gravel and rock from the creek bed half a mile away.

The one good thing to come of this was that Ella grew strong, even stronger than she had been before. Swinging a scythe wasn't quite the same as practicing the sword, but it worked the same muscles and improved her endurance. And shoveling rock was little like competing in a melee, but it built up the callouses on her hands, and taught her to work through her exhaustion, which would soon prove to be a very useful thing for her to know how to do.

Though her every waking hour was filled with work, Ella found a few minutes for herself between tasks. Sometimes, when she had the horses in the field, she'd practice the riding tricks she and her brother had mastered as children, and throw in some of the tumbling techniques she'd learned from the acrobats on her eastern travels. When no one was looking, she'd somersault from one horse to another, or dismount from a horse with a back handspring, just to keep herself sane.

But she only did those things when she was sure no one was looking (I served as lookout, of course). Besides those stolen moments, Ella's only other freedom was in choosing her own projects—if Madame Augusta told her to do sewing, and Ella suggested (with the utmost of politeness) that she'd been planning to tuck point the chimney or mend the shutters, Madame would send her outside to do those tasks. After all, Madame could much more easily find another handmaid to do the sewing—or, if it came to it, Madame could do the sewing herself, but she'd never be caught dead patching the roof or hauling rocks.

And since her husband was too ill to do those chores himself, Ella's willingness saved them the expense of hiring a man.

Thus, there were very few tasks Madame De Bouchard required her to do inside the house, but she always insisted Ella participate in language and dance lessons.

The language lessons, as you might guess, had nothing to do with any concern Madame Augusta might have felt toward the improvement of Ella's linguistic skills. Rather, Madame had quickly ascertained that Ella was an accomplished linguist, and she insisted Ella act as tutor to her daughters.

Likewise, Augusta wanted Ella to help her daughters learn to dance.

Ella didn't consider herself to be an accomplished dancer. However, in the years when she had traveled with her father and brother, especially on evenings when they'd camped among other travelers, it sometimes happened that, after everyone had eaten, if there were few stories to tell or little

news to share, someone might take out an instrument and start playing.

When there was music, there was often dancing, and Ella had learned the dances of many cultures besides her own.

Because of that, she was better than Agatha and Bertha, who refused to listen to criticism, and always insisted they knew everything already, even when it was perfectly obvious to everyone else that they did not.

Occasionally one or more of the handmaids would be a decent dancer. But most often, they were no better than Agatha and Bertha, which was why Madame insisted Ella dance.

Ella almost enjoyed it. If it hadn't been for the constant bickering between Madame and her daughters, or Madame's temper, which struck in harsh words, slaps, and the occasional thrown object, Ella would have found the lessons enjoyable. Dancing wasn't that much different from sword-fighting. It involved rhythm and poise, and staying alert.

If nothing else, the dancing lessons helped to make Ella a better swordsman, as well.

After she'd been at the De Bouchard estate for a little over a year, and had fixed the road and the roof, and replaced the chimney stones, patched the mortar, fixed the shutters, and undertaken several other projects to improve the estate, Madame's husband passed away. This led to a season of many formal visits, which Ella was able to mostly avoid by working outside. No one ever came to see her, anyway.

Which was why she was so surprised one day when one of the new handmaids came to find her in the garden, and announced that she had a visitor.

She raced to the house to see who this visitor could possibly be.

It was her mother.

Ella had not seen her mother since the day her parents had dropped her off. She'd written letters, of course, but since these were always read by Madame Augusta before they were delivered, Ella didn't dare tell her mother anything of the poor treatment she received. And Madame had strictly insisted that

Ella would not be allowed to receive visitors, not even her own parents, as this was distracting to her work, and above her position as handmaid.

Madame De Bouchard did not look happy about Nora's visit, and hovered in the room even after Ella arrived.

Being familiar with Madame's ways, Ella realized quickly the mistress of the estate had no intention of leaving the room.

"Why don't we step outside, Mother?" Ella suggested. This seemed like her safest option, since the De Bouchards never went outside unless they were traveling somewhere.

As she'd hoped, Madame stayed in the house while Ella and her mother stepped out, finding a shady spot just up the lane where they could talk with no fear of being overheard, and where Ella could embrace her mother without Madame scowling down at her.

"What brings you here, Mother? Good news, I hope?" Ella stepped back from the embrace.

Nora's hands shook as she produced a piece of parchment from her bag. The wax seal was broken.

"This came by messenger this morning. I don't know what to do."

Since her mother's emotion threatened to overwhelm her ability to speak, Ella took the letter which her mother held out to her, and read it silently.

Allard of Caprese,

I hope this note finds you well and in good health. I write to ask you to reconsider your decision not to fight with me at tournament. Much has happened since I last saw you. Most importantly, Raedwald of Nordheim, being banned for two months from our circuit, competed instead in the eastern circuit, staying on there several months more, and enjoying great success. He returned two weeks ago, and neither his skills nor his ire toward me have been in any way diminished. I have tried to avoid him, but since I do not wish to withdraw from my events and look like a coward, I don't know what to do. The other men who fight with me are all either easily

beaten, and therefore of little help, or they have allegiances to Raedwald and his father, and therefore cannot be trusted.

I am scheduled to fight at the spring tournament this coming Friday and Saturday, the 26th and 27th, at Charmont. If you could meet me there and fight by my side, I would see to it you were compensated handsomely. I regret that at our last visit, we did not have opportunity to discuss your reasons for turning down my offer, but whatever those reasons may be, I assure you, I will do everything in my power to see to it that they do not hinder you from participating. My life, and the future of the crown, may well depend on your willingness to fight alongside me.

I am still in your debt,
Hugo

Ella's hands trembled as she stared at the note, especially the last couple of sentences. She looked up at her mother with tears in her eyes. "What do you think?"

"I came immediately," her mother said, as though that answered the question.

"Do you think I should go?"

Nora shook her head *no*, but said, "What choice do we have? I can't send your brother in your place, because he and your father have been gone on a trade journey, and are already late in returning. Who knows when they'll be back? They've had increased trouble from bandits of late, and have had to go out of their way. It may be weeks more before he returns, and even then, I doubt Bertie could fight in your place. Hugo met him, too, and will know you're not the same person. Besides which, Bertie's never been as good with the sword as you are, and I don't want him in the melee with grown men."

"So I should go?" Ella asked, hardly daring to hope her mother might agree to it.

"Henry's father has been a good king. His brother Richard is a scoundrel, and your father blames Richard for much of the unrest in the kingdoms along the trade routes. He stirs up trouble. We can't let him kill Henry and take the crown."

"So, I should go?" Ella asked again.

"I don't see how my daughter is supposed to protect a prince, especially in the heat of battle against full grown men. But you've done it before, and he thinks you can do it again. But Ella." Nora grasped her daughter by the shoulders and stared into her eyes. "I also don't see how you can go. I can't go with you, not for long, because I dare not leave Caprese vacant, and the prince is sure to ask you to stay on to continue the circuit. But you can't stay there alone, without anyone."

Tired of being ignored, at this point, I swelled up large enough for the two of them to see me, and rattled a sparkling light display, shaking my fists at them to remind them I would be traveling with Ella.

"Without any full-size human," Nora corrected.

I shook a few more twinkles at her to let her know I appreciated being remembered, and ought not be forgotten again.

"I want to go, Mother. I don't care if I'm all alone."

Nora sighed. "Did you read what he said, about your reasons for turning down his offer? He said, *whatever those reasons are, I will do everything in my power to see they do not hinder you.*"

"Yes, I read it. What are you suggesting? Do you think—"

"I think he needs to know."

"To know what?"

"That you're a girl."

"I can't tell him that!"

"You can't hide it from him forever, not traveling with him. You need someone on your side who knows your secret and will help you keep it. He already said many of the others who travel with him cannot be trusted. Of everyone, he's got the most reason to keep your secret. See?"

"Mother, do you hear what you're saying? You're telling me to do something that's probably illegal, and to let the man who's second in line to the throne in on the secret."

Nora smiled. It was the kind of smile that said she'd thought of that, and knew exactly what she was saying.

Ella stared at her, bewildered.

"If anyone's going to know, it would be best to have that person be above the law," Nora explained. "Look, I'm not in favor of you going, but he sounds like he sincerely needs your help, so I suppose you should go. And if you expect to last, I think you should admit to him who you are."

Ella could not fathom how she could possibly make that confession to Hugo. Even if she got up the courage and found a private moment to tell him without anyone else hearing, he'd send her away immediately. He might even hate her for lying about who she truly was, and take out great vengeance.

And if it was true, that the crime of a woman pretending to be a man, was indeed punishable by death, Hugo's retribution would surely be swift.

No, Ella couldn't stand the thought of upsetting him. It would feel too much like a betrayal. He was depending on her to keep him safe.

To be strong.

To be a man.

There was no way she could let him find out who she truly was.

She didn't mention that part to her mother, though. All she said was, "If I'm going to get packed and travel to Charmont by the twenty-sixth, I'll have to leave now."

Chapter Ten

Madame De Bouchard was furious when Ella announced she was leaving—which surprised Ella. The woman never did anything but criticize her and her work.

Ella felt tremendous relief putting the De Bouchard estate behind her.

When she arrived home and began assembling everything she needed to pack, Ella tried on her body armor and discovered, to her dismay, that it no longer fit properly.

"You've grown," Nora said with a mixture of pride and disappointment.

Ella stared back at her reflection in the polished bronze mirror. There was a gap at her waist where the bottom of her tunic didn't quite meet the top of her hose. This was due, not so much to the fact that she'd grown taller (she'd more or less finished growing in that direction) but to the increase in the size of her chest, which now stretched the garment sideways, even as the leather squeezed her tight.

Her hips, too, threatened to escape the leather pants, and her ankles showed for several inches below the lower cuffs.

Nora sighed so heavily, it sounded more like a groan.

"What am I going to do?" Ella asked. "There's not time to commission a new suit of armor, or even procure the leather to sew one."

"Today is Wednesday. You don't need to get to Charmont until Friday morning. That gives us the rest of today, and all of tomorrow." Nora said as she opened a large trunk in the corner of the room and began riffling through the contents. "I'm not as worried about getting it done as I am about getting it done *right*. It has to be strong enough to protect you, to hold up to repeated use. Most importantly, it has to make you look like a man."

"Getting it done?" Ella repeated, and turned away from scowling at her reflection, to see what her mother had pulled

from the trunk.

Nora handed her great sheets of hard-tanned leather, followed by a metal chest plate. "These will help disguise—" Nora cleared her throat, "your figure."

Then she reached into the trunk again and pulled out something that rattled gently.

Ella's eyes went round. "Chain mail!"

"Your father got it in Persia."

"I've seen it for sale there. It's ridiculously expensive."

"He'd spoken to the merchant on a previous journey and knew the man wanted a fine horse. Our herd had been growing too numerous for the pasture we have to support them, and heaven forbid a drought would strike. We'd never be able to pay for hay."

"Which horse did he trade?" Ella looked at the leather and mail, felt its weight, and weighed the cost against their beloved horses.

"One you'd trained. Banter."

"Banter was an excellent horse. Spirited, but obedient."

"The merchant was impressed with Banter's training. He gave your father an extra foot of mail, he was so pleased."

Ella turned back to the mirror, assessing the greater length she'd need to cover her growing frame. "Good. We're going to need it."

Ella and her mother got to work immediately. They used Ella's old armor as a pattern, noting where it needed to be expanded, and adding extra room for padding and to allow for her continued growth.

"We've got to keep your curves from showing," Nora insisted, as she and Ella debated exactly how wide the dimensions needed to be. "We'll put framed padding in the shoulders. A man can have big shoulders. Then we'll taper down from there."

"I'm going to look like a stuffed doll with a tiny head," Ella predicted, laughing.

"We'll put extra padding atop your helmet, too. That will even things out."

The two of them sewed by the window until the sunlight was gone, and I helped them by turning up my glow. When the sun sank below the horizon and my glow was no longer enough to see by, they lit a fire in the fireplace, as well as several tallow candles, and sewed by the flickering firelight until they fell asleep over their work, exhausted.

I blew out the candles.

Ella awoke before dawn the next day, too excited to sleep. She hurried to help her mother with the usual chores of the estate, and then they shared a quick breakfast while they got back to work.

By mid-afternoon, the hard leather was pieced together over layers of padding. The arms were not yet attached, but Ella tried on the metal-plated bodice and stood in front of the mirror. "People are going to be jealous."

"Let's hope the men don't take out their jealousy through their swords," Nora said sharply, but she was smiling, pleased with how the project was coming along.

"Even if they do, this armor will protect me," Ella predicted. "We'll have to have this finished and everything else ready before we sleep tonight. I'll leave before the sun is up tomorrow."

"More than this," Nora reminded her. "We've got to put together an entire wardrobe for you. No man wears his armor every day of the week—and it's going to take some creativity to disguise you in your common clothes, with no chest plate to flatten your curves."

"My fingers are sore from sewing hard leather," Ella added by way of agreement. "Let's take a break from the armor and put together a wardrobe."

So they did. To speed the process, they repurposed some of Robert's old clothes, as well as specialized sword-training garments Gustav had left at the house.

"You don't think he'll mind me altering his things?" Ella asked, feeling guilty.

"He never wears them anymore. They were going to get eaten by moths otherwise. He'll be glad to know they've gone

to good use. Now, what do you think of this corset?" Nora asked, raiding her own closet.

"Whatever do I need a corset for?" Ella asked.

"To shrink your chest. If we attach a bit of padding underneath, we can flatten nearly every curve."

"You don't think any of these extra layers will make me look…lumpy?"

"We'll have to add more layers over the top. This vest. A wide belt, worn loosely, to disguise the seams and hold everything in place. Let's try it on and see what we think."

Ella stood before the mirror and tugged everything into place, craning her neck around to see how she looked from the back.

It was a strange silhouette. Not strictly masculine, but not noticeably feminine, either. As long as no one studied her too closely, she figured she ought to pass.

Once they'd finally put together a wardrobe that would help her pass as a man, they went back to sewing the leather armor.

By sunset, both Ella and Nora were exhausted, and the armor still was not finished. Their fingers hurt from pushing needles through the thick leather, and their necks throbbed from bending over the work.

"We're still not done, and I've got to pack everything else I need," Ella moaned.

"Let's take a break and do the bulk of your packing while we have sunlight. I can sew all night and catch up on my sleep tomorrow. You've got to be rested so you can travel and fight."

Ella looked at the fireplace mantle where I perched, already glowing in an effort to add to the fading sunlight. "Or, I could use one of my wishes."

"No!" Nora and I exclaimed in unison, our voices urgent, as though to shout her down were she to try such a thing.

"Don't waste a wish," Nora added. "The situation's not that desperate."

"My magic only lasts until midnight," I reminded them both, in case they'd forgotten the rules. "So what good would it

do for me to finish the work? It would be undone again in the morning."

"True enough," Ella relented, and hurried to pack.

Her exhaustion was greater than her excitement, and after trying on the almost-finished armor one last time, Ella fell straightaway to sleep.

Nora stayed up the whole night through, and placed her last stitch as she and Ella ate breakfast together.

"There now." She held up the leather-armored pants. "It's not perfect, but it will hold through the day, and you'll have your needle and thread to finish it up better afterward."

"It's amazing!" Ella slipped into the armor and stood in front of the mirror, securing the braid of her long blonde hair into a flat cap atop her head. Then she slipped the helmet on over that. A panel of chain mail hung to one side of her face, and she pulled it across her nose, clasping the top of the three hooks into the loops on the other side. "I look like a knight!"

Nora stood behind her daughter, beaming. "Maybe someday you can be one," she whispered.

"I know it's not possible," Ella admitted, suddenly feeling self-conscious of her dream.

"You look like a knight. And if you look like one, and fight like one, who says you can't be one? What do we know, really, about what's possible?" Nora insisted. It may have been because she hadn't slept, and wasn't thinking straight. Or perhaps the vision of her daughter in armor and chain-mail opened her eyes to possibilities she had never before truly seen.

"Thank you, Mother! Thank you!" Ella hugged her mother, loaded her things onto the back of her strongest mare, and hurried off on her way, knowing that she'd have to make good time to arrive at the tournament grounds before Hugo began to worry.

The ride was not a difficult one, and soon Ella was joined by others headed to the same destination. The closer she drew, the more crowded the way became, which forced her to slow her pace somewhat. She'd been riding with her face uncovered, but now hooked the chain mail panel back into place under her

eyes, covering most of her face.

Though she was only just fifteen, and therefore not to the age where a young man would necessarily be able to start growing a beard, nonetheless, she was aware that her face was not a manly one, and she guessed, quite rightly, that the less she showed of it, the lower the chances that anyone might become suspicious of her true identity.

The sun was up, though not yet high in the sky, when Ella reached the outskirts of the tournament. The line for registration was long, so Ella went first in search of Hugo, in case he might have a strategy for her registration.

She wandered the tournament for some long minutes, well aware that she didn't even know what Hugo's tent looked like, or if he even bothered to pitch one on tournament grounds.

Nor was she even sure what color to look for. He'd been wearing blue armor at the previous tournament, but that had been a bit small on him then, so she fully expected he'd have replaced it in the intervening months, and might not have chosen the same color for his new set.

In those days, coats of arms and family crests had not yet become the elaborate designs they would evolve into in the high middle ages. The colors individuals chose often had as much to do with the materials available and what they could afford, as it did with family history and tradition.

Finally, Ella spotted a familiar face. "Dominic," she called in the deepest voice she could muster.

Dominic turned to look, but clearly did not recognize her.

She hopped off her horse, then immediately wished she hadn't, because she was shorter than Dominic and most of the rest of the crowd. "Allard of Caprese. We fought together in the melee here last spring."

"Aye, Allard! Good to see you again, Boy. You've got some new fancy armor. Chain mail and all, eh?"

Ella realized with a pang that Dominic was still wearing his same old simple leather armor, which had only grown more worn in the months since she'd last seen him.

"Yes," she admitted, not feeling nearly as proud of it as she

had that morning. "I hope I haven't wasted my family's last penny, but my mother insisted on my safety."

"Ah, mothers," Dominic commiserated. "If mine wasn't with God in heaven, she'd probably insist the same."

Ella felt even worse, knowing she had chain mail and a living mother, while Dominic had neither. She quickly got to the point of stopping him. "Have you seen Hugo of Adalaard?"

"Indeed I have, last evening, and he asked me the same question of you. Told him I'd keep my eyes out for you, but I would never have recognized you if you hadn't called my name."

"Do you know where I might find him?"

"He told me where he'd pitched his tent. This way."

Since Dominic was on foot, Ella led her horse. It was slow going through the crowd, but Ella soon spotted a blue and yellow tent big enough to house six men.

"Hugo! You home?" Dominic called out as they approached.

The fabric at the doorway fluttered, and Henry stepped out into the morning sunshine.

He wasn't in his full armor yet, only leather pants and an undershirt. The hair on his chin had grown thicker, and though he kept the beard close-cropped, it covered the lower half of his face thickly.

Henry looked first to Dominic and then, as his eyes adjusted to the morning light, to Ella. "Allard?" He asked, his usually-confident voice tinged with hesitancy.

Ella unhooked the chain mail panel so that it hung to one side, showing off her whole face. Though she supposed she ought to look serious, she couldn't help grinning. Remembering her vow to keep Henry from discovering her true identity, she tried to keep her voice low, though it threatened to break. "It's me. I'm here."

Henry surprised her by bounding forward, wrapping both arms around her, and spinning her once around. "You made it!" When he set her down again, he looked as though he might weep with happiness and relief.

Ella felt suddenly awkward looking up at him and grinning. She had let go of her horse's lead rope in the spinning, and bent round to pick it up.

"I've got to get registered," Dominic said as he waved and turned to leave them.

"Dominic!" Henry called.

Dominic looked back, and Henry tossed him a coin.

"With my thanks," Henry told him.

"Not necessary," Dominic said, and tried to hand the coin back, but Henry waved him on his way, and Dominic went, looking reluctantly pleased, if slightly embarrassed.

Henry showed Ella where to tie her horse next to his, with a pile of hay and a bucket of water near their noses.

"This is a beautiful horse. Arabian?" Henry asked.

"Yes. Her name is Mirage."

"Mirage, this is Bastian." Henry introduced the mare to his stallion, then looked at Mirage more intently. "You don't see many horses with that much Arabian blood in them, not this far north."

"She's pure Arabian. My father purchased both her dam and sire in Arabia."

"I'd always heard the sheiks wouldn't part with their horses."

"There was a drought. The horses were nearly dead from starvation, and the sheiks needed what little grass they had to keep the rest of their animals alive. Horses were dying. To hear my father tell the tale, I don't honestly think the sheik thought the animals would live, but my father nursed them back to health, and we've had a fine herd ever since."

"Are you planning to ride her in the melee?"

Ella nodded. "She's my finest horse for that event. I've ridden her in junior tournaments. She's quick and brave. Never falters."

"Most men prefer stallions for that event. They tend to be stronger." Henry studied her face as he spoke.

"The girls can be just as strong as the boys, if given a chance to prove themselves," Ella said evenly.

Henry grinned. "I'm sure she will. Come on inside my tent." He led her into the enclosed pavilion.

Ella blinked a bit as her eyes adjusted to the lower light inside. She had fully expected to see other men inside—the tent was of the size usually shared by at least three or four men—but there wasn't anyone in sight. The draped fabric ceiling was held high by wooden poles—high enough they could both stand upright.

"Have you registered yet?" Henry asked.

Ella shook her head. "I thought I'd check in with you first and find out which events you'd like me to do."

"I want you in the mounted and foot melee. The other events are your choice, but I'd advise you not to wear yourself out with too many."

"The sword has always been my best event, and I thought I might try the axe as well," Ella told him. At the Bouchard estate she'd been the one to chop all the firewood, and had often made a game of it, pretending she was competing with the axe.

"The axe can be dangerous," Henry cautioned her. "Your advantage in sword is that you're quick—your smaller size gives you less body to maneuver, which means the blade of your sword can reach its mark faster. That's not any help in axe. The axe favors the large and the strong."

Ella lifted one eyebrow in challenge. "That's precisely why I'd like to compete in the axe—I need the practice."

"Practice is fine, as long as it doesn't kill you. Men don't get injured as often with the axe as with the sword, but when they do, it's usually worse. The blades may be blunted, but the axe-head is still heavy. I've seen a man's skull crushed right through his helmet. He dropped dead instantly."

Ella felt her eyes go wide. Realizing she probably looked like a child, or worse yet, a little girl, she forced her voice low and joked, "Raedwald getting revenge?"

Henry didn't laugh, but nodded solemnly. "Through Uliad."

At that, Ella's jaw dropped. "Are either of the Ulster

brothers competing in axe today?"

"The registrations haven't been finalized. They weren't on the list last night, so you might be safe, but you're not going to be any help to me in the melees tomorrow if you get crushed in the axe today."

"I've heard talk they're thinking of making clubs a secondary weapon in the melee," Ella noted the rumor that had been circulating for years. "If that's the case, experience with the axe would be to my benefit in the melee."

Henry grinned. "You're thinking of staying on the circuit long enough to see clubs allowed?"

"I'll stay on as long as you'll have me." Ella tried to keep her voice low, but the words came out in a strange, almost husky whisper.

Hugo's grin grew larger, but then he sobered. "Where are your things, then? Do you have a tent?"

"I thought I'd get a room in town."

"Nonsense. You can stay with me."

Ella hesitated, trying to think how she'd keep her identity a secret sleeping in a tent full of men. She looked around and saw what she thought might be two bedrolls, but, as was common practice during the day in such a small space, there were no beds currently unrolled. "How many are staying here?"

"Just two besides myself. I've got Sigismund, my page, a boy of eight who's gone to fetch water (he can't carry much, but it keeps him out of mischief)." Henry whispered the last bit lest the boy return and hear himself disparaged, then spoke again in a regular voice. "And a herald, Jerome. You may have seen him at the tournament last spring. Lad of sixteen, bright red hair, skinny as a whip, and quick as one as well."

Ella nodded, recalling the thin red-head who rushed about with ledgers among the other heralds.

"He's at the registration table now. He'll be able to tell us if Raedwald or the Ulsters are registered for the axe."

As Henry explained all this, Ella weighed whether she would be able to stay in the tent with those others and not be found out. An eight-year-old wouldn't be difficult to fool,

perhaps, but a sharp herald who'd worked many tournaments would be another matter entirely.

"Sigismund is always tired by evening, and turns in before the sun goes down," Henry continued. "Jerome is quite the opposite. He works hard all day long, and can't settle down to sleep until he's had his drink. I won't let him drink in the tent because he sings when he gets drunk, and his singing makes every dog in a half mile radius howl, so he's off with his drinking friends most nights. I never know when he'll return, but he knows not to wake me, so it's not a bother, though I have to prod him ten times to get him going in the mornings. They're neither of them much trouble, really, and Sigismund can mind your horse as well as mine."

Ella grinned with relief. Not only did it sound promising that she might be able to keep her identity from the others, but Henry seemed intent on convincing her to stay. She'd never heard him talk so much, or so quickly. "If you don't think I'll be in your way—"

"In my way?" Henry spread his arms wide. "Nonsense! This tent can sleep six grown men." He untied something at the ceiling as he spoke. "And if you're worried about Jerome's snoring—which is frightful, I assure you—these panels create privacy walls that help keep out the sound." Fabric unrolled from the ceiling, creating a curtain that fell to the floor. Henry's slightly-muffled voice came from the other side. "Can't drown it out completely, but I'm sure it will be quieter than any room you'd find in town, with more privacy, too."

Henry began to roll the curtain back up to its place at the ceiling.

"So, what do you say? Will you stay here?"

Chapter Eleven

"Yes, I would love to stay, then," Ella agreed, confident her secret would be safer in the tent than in town. "Thank you so very much for inviting me. I'll carry in my things and then get registered."

Henry finished tying up the curtain, then helped Ella carry in her things, situating her with one side of the tent more or less to herself, with little Sigismund's spot beside her. Then Henry accompanied her to the registration table, where they learned that, indeed, both Ulster brothers were registered to compete in the axe.

Though Henry frowned as she did it, Ella registered for the event. "I'm not guaranteed to fight either of them," she reminded him.

"I doubt either of them will be eliminated early," Henry predicted as they walked back to his tent. "If you stay in long enough, you'll fight them. They may not recognize you in your new armor, especially if you keep your face covered—and while we're on the topic, for that reason, I think you should keep the chain mail over your face as often as possible, especially if there's any chance of them seeing you. Raedwald holds a double grudge. He won't forget."

Henry pulled in a deep breath. "But the point is, even if they don't know who you are, they're not fair fighters. They'll injure and kill anyone just to win a round."

"I'm not that bad with an axe," Ella assured him, almost insulted by his lack of confidence in her skill. "Really. I expect to do well."

And she did, believe it or not.

The details of that first tournament have blurred in my memory, but Ella made it almost to quarter finals in sword, and was eliminated a single round before that in axe, in spite of rushing around to make her events for both.

Uliad was eliminated from the axe even before Ella was,

and Einhard took sixth place in that event. The way the random round assignments fell, Ella didn't have to face either of them.

Raedwald competed in sword only and took sixth without ever once competing directly against Henry—which, Henry theorized to Ella later, may well have been because the organizers knew who Raedwald and Hugo really were, and wanted to avoid pitting them against one another.

Henry, as Hugo, got third place in sword, and seemed almost as pleased that Ella didn't place, as he was with placing, himself.

"If you'd made quarter finals, they'd have announced your name with all the other finalists, and not just ring-side," Henry explained to her as they sat at the tent later, tugging off their gloves and inspecting their blisters. The sun had set even before the final sword rounds, but torches burned at every corner and nearly every tent. Henry had lit two.

"It's better this way," Henry continued. "Raedwald and the Ulster brothers don't yet know you're here—and if you can keep away from them in the melees tomorrow, we might make it through the weekend without them seeing you."

"You're right, of course," Ella agreed, more concerned about the three new blisters on her hand than she was with her final results. She was not at all disappointed with her performance, especially considering she'd been out of practice for a year (dodging Madame De Bouchard's blows hardly counted as practice, even if it had improved her reaction time).

"My whole point in joining you is to help keep you safe, not draw additional ire," Ella added.

"Eventually, they're going to figure out who you are," Henry reminded her. "Then you can win all you want. But it's not a bad idea to keep your head down until then." He leaned in and looked at the blisters on her hands. "Ouch! Three? How did you get so many?"

"New gloves." Ella told him, not bothering to mention she hadn't held a sword in a year. "They'll break in eventually. The swelling should be down by morning."

Henry clucked his tongue. "They'll still be a mite painful

for a few days."

"I've had worse," Ella assured him.

Henry chuckled. "I'm famished, and I promised to pay all your expenses, so what do you say we find supper before all the food tents close down?"

The two of them went off and ate, then returned to the tent. Henry peeked inside, holding the torch carefully away from the flammable fabric. "Shh. Sigismund is already asleep." He pointed inside so Ella could see where the page boy lay.

Henry returned the torch to its post outside. Only a small amount of the light made it through to the inside of the tent.

"I'll lower the partition so Jerome doesn't bother you when he returns," Henry volunteered.

By the time Ella had picked her way around to her bags, Henry had the curtain down.

The curtain was still down when Ella awoke the next morning. She could hear the rumble of voices and sounds of the camp outside, but no one had bothered her. She suited up in her armor, put her things away and rolled her bedroll, and raised the curtain herself, tying it in place.

The red-haired Jerome snored softly from his pallet, but Sigismund's and Henry's beds were already rolled up and set out of the way.

She found Henry outside holding a pan of eggs over a small cooking fire.

"You're just in time. Hungry?"

"Famished."

"How are the blisters this morning?"

"Going down. Still painful, but not so much that I notice unless I think about it." She crouched down by the fire, its warmth welcome in the cool morning, and nodded to a pot that sat among the coals. "What's brewing?"

"Coffee."

Ella's eyes went wide with excitement. "Where did you get coffee?" She'd enjoyed the beverage many times. Coffee came from Ethiopia and her father tended to trade east more than south, but he'd always made it a point to look for it whenever

he crossed paths with coffee trade routes. Still, she hadn't had any since before she'd gone to Madame De Bouchard's.

"You're familiar with it?" Henry asked, not really answering her question.

"Yes. I love it."

"Have some. I'll have to make more." He set the eggs aside (they were done cooking by then), and poured her drink into a mug, careful to avoid letting too many of the ground beans spill past the pot's sieve.

Over coffee and eggs, they discussed their strategy for the upcoming melees. The foot melee would, as usual, precede the mounted melee.

"I think you should stay far from Raedwald and the Ulsters," Henry advised.

"So should you," Ella agreed jokingly. The coffee put her in a bright mood, besides the victory of making it through the night without being discovered.

"I'd like to, but then again, assuming I last until the end, and so do they, I'll have to face them eventually."

"Won't I have to face them as well, then?"

"Fight them, yes. Face them—I'd rather you didn't."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Henry began, then took a sip of coffee, swallowing before continuing. "They don't seem to have realized you're here yet. They'd only know you're here if someone told them, and I don't think anyone dislikes you enough to do that."

"What if they were close enough to one of my rings to hear my name called yesterday?" Ella sipped her coffee slowly, enjoying the taste.

Henry shrugged off the possibility. "They had their own fights in their own rings. It's possible they may have even forgotten your name after all these months. But if they see your face, they might recognize you and remember. Even if they don't, if you fight near me like some kind of bodyguard, they'll purposely decide to take you out."

Ella chewed a mouthful of eggs, unsure how to respond to

Henry's theories.

Henry sighed. "There's been a lot that's happened since you've been gone, even before Raedwald's return. You know how it is with the tournament circuit. Many of the same men face each other week after week. Sure, you'll get your local heroes out to try their skill against us, but the men who finish at the top in each event are often the same men." He paused to take another bite.

"If they're the best fighters, that's how that's supposed to work," Ella noted.

"It's fine if that's all that happens," Henry agreed. "The trouble is that the losers resent the winners. Not all of them, but many. They pay their entry fees, and the winners take home the money, so you can understand why they'd be upset. They hold grudges."

"Just like Raedwald holds grudges?" Ella guessed.

Henry nodded as he swallowed more coffee, then said. "And just like Raedwald—"

"They want revenge," Ella concluded. "So, they target the winners, then? Try to take them out?"

Henry nodded. "I've seen it more and more in recent tournaments. They'll rush the winners of the previous tournament. Three or four of them will attack one man and try to eliminate him early while the field is full."

"That leaves fighters who are easier to defeat," Ella realized aloud. "And that's part of why you contacted me?"

"I have been outnumbered, but if they see you're working with me, they'll target you as well. It's only a matter of time before everyone realizes we're working together, just as everyone knows Raedwald works with the Ulsters. But we've got a small advantage that no one knows yet, and I'd like to keep that advantage as long as I can."

"Makes sense," Ella agreed as she finished off her eggs. "Okay, where do you want me, then?"

Henry dumped the old coffee grounds over the fire, then used a long stick to draw in the mess of coals and steaming grounds left behind. He drew a rectangle to represent the field,

and marked their places in it.

"If Raedwald and the Ulsters line up to my right, as they often do, I'll want you to my left. I may try to put Dominic between us, but closer to me because they've been rushing him, too."

"They've been targeting Dominic?"

"Yes, and he hasn't won anything. I fear it's because they associate him with me, which isn't fair to him at all. He hasn't taken home any money in weeks, and frankly, I don't know how much longer he'll be able to pay his entry fees."

Ella frowned, unhappy about all of it. "With all these groups working together to target people, you'd think someone like me could sneak up on some of them and eliminate them while their attention is diverted."

Henry grinned. "You've read my mind."

"No." Ella pointed to the mess of a drawing in the old coals, which wouldn't have looked like anything to anyone else. "Just your drawings." She returned his smile.

Sigismund returned then, and Henry introduced him to Allard before instructing him to go in and awaken Jerome. "But stay back this time. You know how he thrashes."

This was followed by a racket inside the tent, and shortly after Jerome staggered out, muttered something about finding breakfast before he had to start work, and loped away, while Henry reminded Sigismund to gather fresh hay for the horses, and clean up after them.

Henry and Ella then strategized a bit more, but the basic plan was much as Henry had first proposed it. Ella was to stay back from him, picking off attackers at the edges and trying to stay out of Raedwald's sight. If she saw Henry needed help, of course she could try to come to his aid, but she'd have to weigh the danger to him against the danger of being recognized.

"They're going to recognize me eventually," Ella reminded Henry. "I'd rather it be in battle than in line for the latrine, because at least in battle I could use the moment of surprise to my advantage."

This comment sent Henry to laughing, as many of her

statements did. The worry that had clouded his face when he'd first stepped from his tent the day before, had been replaced by a lighter heart, and hope.

The hope wasn't too badly damaged when they lined up for the foot melee, and Raedwald surprised them by lining up to Henry's left instead of his right.

Ella spotted him immediately and, as she'd discussed with Henry, headed to his left…where she looked up and saw both Ulster brothers standing across the field, on the opposite side of the line from Raedwald.

She and Henry had not discussed this possibility.

Ella looked down the line toward Henry, and watched his face (or the part she could see over his chain-mail) as he located Raedwald and the Ulsters. His eyes narrowed, then searched the line for her. He gave her a shrug with eyebrows raised, admitting he didn't know where to place her.

Not that she had time to move again, anyway. The herald in the middle of the field had already shouted most of the rules, and a moment later, he ran to the sidelines while the trumpets blared.

The two lines of men surged at one another. Ella ran forward, but purposely didn't move as quickly as the other men. She held back, still unsure about the unexpected arrangement and how she ought to respond to it. Besides, she figured, if she was supposed to be a secret weapon, she probably shouldn't insert herself into the heat of the fray. And from the rear, she could watch the action better, and keep an eye on all the key players.

Her position also worked with their plan for her to pick off distracted members of the other team. Since the men were working in groups, as Henry had warned her they likely would, the lines were more like a row of clusters with space in between.

Ella leapt toward one of these spaces and nabbed a red sash with the tip of her sword, sending a man she didn't even know sulking away.

Not that she paid him any heed. The flutter of red drew the

attention of nearby swordsmen, and two of them turned on her, enraged that she'd cost them a teammate.

Two against one was never fair, especially when the two were each twice the size of the one.

I flew overhead in a fit, half beside myself with concern at the snickersnee shenanigans below me.

But I needn't have worried. Ella executed a move Gustav had picked up on their travels to the Orient, which he'd drilled with her until she could execute it perfectly, and on the fly, as now. Ella first seemed to hop upward with her right knee raised. At the same time as this, she thrust her sword forward at the attacker on her right, blocking the blow he aimed at her neck.

But the force of the movement wasn't to her right. All that was a feint meant to gain height, lifting her quite unexpectedly into the air as she kicked out with her left heel to the side, striking the left attacker squarely on his shield, and pushing him back into the men behind him (who turned on him immediately, furious at his imposition).

That left Ella to fight the man on her right, who was the larger of the two, and I daresay, the better swordsman (the other being quickly eliminated by the men he'd crashed into, one of whom was actually on his own team, but who'd been so surprised by the sudden blow, he essentially held the man down while his opponent stole his sash).

Ella's steps stuttered as she landed from the leaping kick, and her foe swung hard at her shoulder. I knew she could never get her sword raised again in time to block the blow, and indeed, since she was falling forward already from landing her kick, she ducked low.

This might have been a good strategy (if it was strategic at all—she may have been falling, as far as I could see) but her larger opponent lunged at her, obviously intending to crush her with his weight so he could pluck her sash.

But here the martial arts Ella had practiced in the Orient worked to her advantage. As the man bore down, Ella fell back quite on purpose with her knees near her chest, and her feet

poised above her like those of a tumbling acrobat. She caught her attacker in the chest with the soles of her boots and rolled backward, heaving him behind her while she somersaulted over.

Upon landing, she rolled to her side and scrambled to her feet, panting from the effort of dislodging the heavy man.

He lay on the ground quite stunned behind her, and Ella staggered forward, intent on claiming his sash.

But another man was already leaping at her from behind.

"Ella!" I shouted, growing large as a dragonfly and pointing as I flew past her face and then up, out of the way (I'd be no use to her crushed, you know).

With this warning, Ella spun right, sword slashing in a horizontal blow, taking this new attacker quite by surprise, for he had no idea she knew he was there, and he may have been slightly distracted by the oddest-shaped dragonfly he'd ever seen.

Whatever the case, he would not remember anything of it the next day, for Ella, swinging blindly with no sense of his true position, caught him in the forehead with the pommel of her sword as he crouched low, and sent him keeling dizzily down in a slump.

She was still trying to catch her breath, and therefore was a bit slow reaching for his sash.

One of her blue-sashed fellows caught it instead as he bounded past, and then leapt further to pluck the sash of the man she'd somersaulted moments before, who was only that moment heaving his portly form upright.

"Allard!" Cried the fighter as he nabbed the second sash, and Ella recognized Rolf.

She might have exclaimed a surprised greeting, but she heard her name again from behind.

"Allard?" There was shock and fury in the tone, and Ella turned back just as Uliad shoved away the man he'd been fighting, and pointed his sword at her, barreling toward her with his face contorted by rage.

So, he hadn't forgotten, as she'd hoped.

Like a gladiator facing a charging bull, she stared him down as he barreled toward her. At the last second she leapt out of his path, spinning to land facing him, slashing at him with her sword as he stumbled past.

The blow caught him on his shoulders, but rather than admit defeat, he recovered, spun back around, and charged her again, coming at her from her left, which was less than optimum considering she held her sword in her right hand.

She raised her shield.

At that moment Rolf, who'd been bounding through the field as though it was a flower garden, and sashes merely blooms to be plucked, leapt gracefully toward Uliad and, unseen by the focused fighter, tugged the red sash from its loop.

Uliad's face turned the color of the stolen sash, and if ever a man was said to have steam emerge from his ears, he did. But with his sash obviously absent, he had no choice but to stomp from the list, hacking at members of the opposing team as he went.

"You're back!" Rolf exclaimed, raising his sword to block an approaching fighter. "Nice chain mail!"

"Thanks!" Ella ducked low as another fighter dived at her. She hit the ground and rolled to her feet, coming up next to two fighting men and slapping the red-sashed one with the side of her sword.

Rolf followed her and grabbed that man's sash, as well.

As the draping bundle in Rolf's hand grew, the field thinned.

Ella looked left and spotted Henry locked in combat with a skilled swordsman, their blades tapping a rhythmic song of battle and the quest for glory. Raedwald was locked in battle with another man not far from Henry, and looked fully intent on cutting his way past his opponent to reach his cousin.

With many men between her and the prince, Ella decided it was, perhaps, time for her to start fighting her way toward Henry, especially if she was going to reach him before Raedwald did.

The battle line, which had originally met in the middle of the field where the two armies clashed, now undulated like a winding river across the list, heaving and surging as each side struggled for supremacy. So it wasn't as though Ella could simply dart around by going behind the line.

The line was everywhere, rippling constantly as men fought and fell, condensing as the field thinned and fighters moved toward the center.

Ella tried to skirt a pair of swordsmen locked in battle to her left, but as she made to go around behind them, the blue-sashed fighter danced backward, and his partner followed so closely, Ella had to block the swipe of his blade with hers.

While she thrust the blow backward, her teammate plucked the man's red sash.

"Many thanks!"

"Welcome!" Ella called as she ducked under his arm and attempted to sprint through a gap before it closed.

A man fell backward onto the ground directly in front of her.

Ella leapt over him just as the soldier who'd thrown him back dived after him, intent on his sash. Her sword already raised as she hurdled the prone figure, Ella caught the man with the flat of her blade in his leather-armored midsection.

The force of the impact bent her wrist backward, jarring it painfully.

Ella cried out and nearly dropped her sword.

The man whose midsection she'd struck now turned on her.

Einhard.

He swung his sword at her head.

She raised hers to block the blow, but her wrist buckled on impact and she struggled to keep hold of her weapon.

Einhard chuckled hungrily as he brought his blade back around, this time aiming for her neck.

Chapter Twelve

Ella ducked. She'd have rolled, as well, but there wasn't room, not here in the thick of battle.

Instinct told her Einhard would swing his blade at her again, so instead of looking up, she thrust her shield above her head.

A blade slapped the wood even as she shoved it upward. A pair of feet staggered a half-step back, absorbing the sudden counter-force.

Ella put her weight on her left leg, still crouching low, and swept her right leg around in a low kick, catching the staggering feet at the ankles.

Einhard fell, but not backward.

He landed with his full weight on her shield, penned in by fighters on either side.

The breath left Ella's lungs as she crumpled, knees already bent, nothing left to absorb the impact of the weight thrust so heavily upon her.

From my vantage point flying above her, she appeared to have been flattened against the ground.

Just as I began to fear I'd have to fly down into the fray to see what had become of her, Ella reared up, sucking in a breath as she powered skyward, her sword tipped back to the blue side of the field.

Einhard tumbled into blue territory, and Rolf immediately pounced, snatching up his sash.

Ella wobbled forward, tottering unsteadily, her sword limp as she careened toward the prince.

Henry was still clacking his sword against the same opponent, neither side weakening, growing tired, or giving way.

But Raedwald was on the move, himself locked in a duel with a swordsman from the blue team.

Ella recognized Dominic, and her heart cheered silently

inside her with the knowledge that her teammate had not yet been eliminated.

Her wrist throbbed. She tried to lift her sword as she approached the duel, but a pins-and-needles sensation shot through her fingers, and she knew she had little control over her weapon.

She was barely able to keep hold of it at all.

From the droop of Dominic's shoulders, she could tell he was growing tired, and would likely be unable to hold Raedwald off for much longer.

"Rolf! Follow me! Another sash!" Ella yelled. She braced her shield against her left side, lowered her shoulder, and ran at an angle into Raedwald's midsection at full force, which wasn't very forceful considering she'd just dead-lifted Einhard, and her muscles still trembled from the effort of it.

"Have you gone mad?" Rolf called as he vaulted her legs, spinning around to block Raedwald's sword as it flew toward Ella's back.

His opponent distracted, Dominic grabbed Raedwald's sash, tugging hard, though it resisted coming loose.

Still crouched low, Ella swept her right leg in the same move that had felled Einhard. But this time, her trembling legs were not so swift, as though Raedwald stumbled backward, he did not fall.

The motion was enough to rip the sash free of its loop, leaving behind a tuft of red fabric.

Dominic held up his tattered prize. "Did you sew it in?" he exclaimed.

Ella didn't wait to learn the answer, but barreled sideways into the swordsman who fought with Henry. The man stumbled, and Ella went down on top of him, rolling off and dropping her sword as her hurting hand hit the dirt.

Henry pulled the man's sash free, then extended his hand to Ella, offering to help her up.

She winced in pain as he tugged her to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

Ella glanced around the field, anticipating attack, but none

came. The blue side had a clear advantage, and the few red team members who remained on their feet were being quickly overwhelmed.

Even Raedwald stomped to the sidelines.

"I wrenched my wrist." Ella scooped up her sword from the ground and tried to extend the weapon with her hurting hand. It wobbled noticeably. "It just got bent funny. Should be fine."

"You're sure you haven't broken a bone?" Henry looked sincerely concerned.

Ella shrugged off the question as the trumpets blew, signaling the end of the melee.

Henry and Ella caught up to Dominic as they headed off the field.

Dominic still held the sash he'd taken from Raedwald. He was inspecting the tattered end.

"What happened there?" Henry asked.

Dominic explained about the sash tearing as he pulled it free from Raedwald's shoulder. "I'd caught it three times before that, but couldn't pull it loose," he added. "I found this in the threads." Dominic held out his hand, and the three of them stopped to peer down at what he held there.

A tiny, thorn-shaped bit of wood lay in his palm.

Ella recognized it immediately. "It's a thorn from a sandbur. He must have used it to make his sash harder to pull free."

"He cheated," Dominic concluded, then laughed. "I'm almost impressed he thought of such a thing. Very tricky."

"I doubt he thought of it himself," Ella clarified. "I've seen the trick before on the eastern circuit. It started out that men would claim the sash must have picked up a bur by accident, but it became a common problem. The heralds would check everyone's sashes any time there was suspicion someone might be using burs. Raedwald most likely encountered the idea over there."

"He's cunning and corrupt. I'm not surprised he'd import a new way of cheating." Henry's nostrils flared. "It makes me wonder what else he's up to that we haven't found out."

The three of them found a herald and tried to explain their suspicions that Raedwald had used burs to secure his sash in place, but by the time they'd explained all that had happened, Raedwald had left the area, and was nowhere to be seen.

"I'll tell the others," the herald offered. "We'll watch him more carefully in the future. At this point, that's all I can do."

About that time, Rolf ambled over, counting the coins he'd earned with the sashes he'd collected. "Allard, good fellow, I will have to buy you an ale. You're a good man to follow on the field."

Ella appreciated the compliment. "I thought you didn't like the melee. You're an archer, not a swordsman."

"Ah, but I've watched enough of these, I figured out the trick to them. If a man is smart, and doesn't get caught up in all that sword fighting nonsense, he can make a good profit off sashes."

Ella and Henry laughed.

"Are you planning to do the same in the mounted melee?" Henry asked him.

Rolf looked surprised. "And risk getting trampled to death? Mounted melee is much too dangerous. I'd like to live long enough to spend my winnings, thank you."

"And what about you?" Henry asked Ella. "Are you going to do the mounted melee?"

It took Ella a moment to realize what he was asking, since she thought the question had already been decided. "I'm registered for it, aren't I?"

"Yes, but your wrist—"

Ella held out her sword again, somewhat steadier this time. "Let's find lunch and see how it feels. I think a rest will do me some good."

Rolf went to lunch with them, and regaled Henry with his accounts of Allard's performance in battle (which Henry hadn't observed, being himself engaged in heated duels for the bulk of the competition). Henry was more concerned than impressed with the results of Allard's participation. "The Ulsters both know you're here, then. There's no hiding you now."

"It was inevitable," Ella reminded him. "And we bested them. Isn't that good?"

Henry shook his head somberly. "It's only reinforced their hatred toward you. They'll be that much more set on revenge. You'll have to watch out this afternoon."

After they'd eaten, Ella's wrist still hurt. She could move her hand and her fingers, but it hurt to do so.

"I don't think you should fight," Henry concluded. "It's the same hand as your blisters."

"I'm fine. I'm perfectly fit to fight. I'm certainly not withdrawing because of a few blisters."

"It's not the blisters or even the wrist," Henry argued. "It's that you're not in peak form and you need to be. Raedwald and his men know you're here. They're going to target you."

"Would you have me go home, then?" Ella asked him with challenge sparking in her eyes.

Henry fumed silently.

"You invited me to come fight," Ella continued in her deepest, manliest voice. "If I'm not going to fight, I've no purpose."

Henry scowled and cleared his throat. "I don't want you getting killed or maimed at my invitation."

"If I'm injured, it's my own fault." Ella leaned in close to him, her brows knit with determination. "I want to fight."

"Are you sure you do?"

"Yes!"

"Fine then. Let's get our horses."

Sigismund had the horses fed, watered, and brushed down, and probably would have saddled them, as well, if he'd been tall enough to do the job.

"Good boy, Sigi." Henry patted his shoulder heartily. "Do you want to watch the melee?"

"Yes, Sir, I do."

Henry and Ella finished saddling their horses and preparing to leave. Then Henry surprised Ella by picking up Sigismund and setting him on his horse.

The boy rode, beaming, while Ella and Henry walked,

leading the horses through the maze of tents and people.

"What's your strategy when they come at you all together?" Henry asked.

"Fight them off."

"How?"

"With the lance in my left hand. It's longer than my sword."

"You're going to take on three or four men with one stick?"

"And a sword."

"In your injured hand."

Ella sighed. "You still don't want me to fight."

"I want you to have a strategy."

"What do you think I should do?"

Henry shrugged. "Surprise them. Run past them, through them. Turn around and flee. Hide behind the other fighters. Something."

Surprise them.

Ella thought back to her childhood years practicing circus-style tricks with her mother's horses. She could ride standing, even on one foot. She could slip off one horse and onto another while both were at a run. She could mount the saddle of a horse in motion, and even ride two horses at once (with one foot on each).

Any of those tricks would surprise her opponents. The catch was, Ella hadn't practiced them seriously in many long months, and had never practiced them with a lance in one hand a sword in the other. And if she misjudged anything, she could end up falling to the ground in the midst of a surging field of trampling hooves.

She didn't have long to worry about it, though. They reached the field shortly, and Henry began lining up the men of his team, leaving Ella in the back to be placed once he saw where Raedwald and the Ulsters positioned themselves.

Ella watched Henry at work, and wondered at how the men followed his orders. He wasn't the official team captain, or anything like that. He had some kind of superior status for

having placed highly in his events, but several others had done just as well, and many of them were far older than Henry, and had far more experience.

So, why did they listen to him? Did they all know who he was, in spite of his alias? Did they know he would someday be their king? Or did his training as a leader give him an advantage over the others, skills in assertiveness that mattered more than his family line?

She supposed it was the former reason, but spent little time ruminating over the question before Henry placed her to his left. She took her spot and looked across the field in time to see three men on the right side of the other line leave their places and move to stand opposite her.

Raedwald, Einhard, and Uliad.

Ella glanced at Henry to see if he'd noticed. Of course he had, and motioned with the movement of his head for her to move to his right.

Mirage backed out of her position in the line, trotted past the tails of the other horses, and nosed into a spot opposite where Raedwald and his men had been earlier.

Ella drew in a deep breath as the herald took the field to begin his pre-battle speech.

Across the field, Raedwald, Einhard, and Uliad moved out from the spots they'd taken, and slipped back into their recently-vacated positions.

Ella looked to Henry again. He was scowling. He'd seen it all—of course he had, everyone had—and he nodded his head quickly, gesturing for Ella to move back to her earlier spot.

But even as he did so, the herald finished his speech and ran from the field as the sound of the trumpet blast overwhelmed the murmur of the crowd and the rattle and clank of the gear on the horses.

The stallions on either side of Ella took off like arrows.

Mirage reared up, eager to move and trained to do so. Ella gave her full rein, and the horse surged forward.

Distracted by Raedwald's maneuverings, and therefore caught off guard by the sudden start of competition, Ella barely

had time to get her lance down into position, and her sword gripped tightly in her hurting hand.

The men rode at her in thunderous unison, chunks of turf, thrown up by their horse's hooves, flying above their heads as they charged down upon her.

Ella gripped her lance and wondered how her three enemies would strike. They'd have to go two of them on one side of her and one on the other, besides all the other men clustered thickly in the line.

But they didn't look as though any of them were going to go to either side. The way they rode at her, heads lowered, eyes brimming with loathing, lances trained at her chest, they seemed quite intent on riding over or through her.

She braced herself in her saddle.

Mirage's steps didn't falter.

The blunted tip of a lance struck the left side of her chest plate an instant before another struck to the right.

But she was already flying backward, the reins ripped from her hand more swiftly than the air was pulled from her lungs.

I saw it from the air and froze, helpless to know what to do.

What saved her, I suppose, is that the combined push from the two lances threw her back with such force, she sailed through the air far enough and fast enough that by the time Raedwald and his men bore down on her, she was already on her feet, and leapt away from being mowed down just in time to catch the rear of Einhard's saddle as he rode past.

Those men, knowing the point of the melee was to unhorse their opponents without themselves being unhorsed, had commissioned saddles with high backs to help hold them in their seats.

This also gave Ella something to hold on to, and she swung herself up onto the horse's back as Einhard drew up speed in preparation for circling back.

The sudden added weight of another person surprised Einhard's mount nearly as much as the sensation of a person leaning against his back surprised Einhard.

The shock was so much for him, Ella swung both her arms

forward, knocking the lance (which had already been rattled by its impact with her chest) free from his hand, and very nearly knocking his sword free, as well.

Einhard was completely disoriented, and unprepared for how to battle an enemy on his back. His horse reared up—it almost looked as though Einhard intended to throw his mount backward, to crush the person who clung to his back.

At the same time, Raedwald and Uliad came around and tried to scrape Ella off the horse, but from my vantage point in the sky, if I hadn't understood their true intentions, I'd have thought they were fighting their teammate, and he, them.

Mirage, meanwhile, was not at all pleased with having Ella forcefully removed from her back. She returned to the spot where she last had a rider, sniffed the air, and finally spotted Ella clinging to Einhard. Mirage galloped over and squeezed between Einhard's mount and the other horses.

Ella swung onto Mirage's back and rode to the sidelines, where the heralds were screaming at her that she was done and needed to leave the field.

She gave them no argument.

Her chest throbbed, and she had no doubt she'd be sporting a royal bruise for days to come. If it hadn't been for the metal chest plate, she might well have ended up with cracked ribs, or worse. But worse than the crushing pain in her chest, was the realization that she hadn't been much use to Henry.

She no sooner exited the field, than she spun Mirage around so she could watch the battle. To Henry's credit, he'd stayed clear of her entanglement with Raedwald and his men. The field was thick enough with horses and their riders that neither Raedwald nor either of the Ulsters had reached him—they were all locked in combat with other fighters who'd engaged them in between.

"Allard!" Rolf came running up to her while she sat watching. "Good heavens, Boy, how are you alive?"

Ella rapped the plate at her chest (she would have banged it harder, but cringed at the thought of adding to her hurt). "Metal plate. Brilliant invention. Someone should figure out how to

make an entire outfit out of this stuff."

"Impossible. You wouldn't be able to move."

"I wouldn't be able to move if I hadn't had it," Ella noted. "I'd be dead."

"You've got to go to the medical tent," Rolf insisted.

Ella tried to ignore him. She was intent on watching Henry, who was across the field and nearly out of sight behind the raging mass of men and horses.

"Come on, then." Rolf grabbed the reins where they drooped alongside Mirage's neck.

Ella tugged the reins from his hands. "What are you doing?"

"Taking you to the medical tent. You've got to be half dead."

"I'm not any part dead. I'm fine, and I'm not going."

"You flew through the air," Rolf informed her with no humor in his words (a rarity for him). "You landed on your back."

Ella couldn't tell him that her entire torso was well padded to disguise her figure, which had cushioned her fall considerably. Instead she said, "The ground was soft. The grass is thick there, and the earth a springy loam. It was like landing in a mound of hay. Now stop making Mirage fidget. I want to hold still and watch the battle."

Rolf glowered but did as instructed, which was a relief to Ella, because Raedwald was closing in on Henry.

"He won't dare hurt him openly, in front of everyone," she said in a straining voice, hoping her words were true.

"Who there?" Rolf asked awkwardly.

"Raedwald." It was all Ella could do to point and resist the urge to cover her eyes. Raedwald did, indeed, have his lance trained on Henry.

With a crack that echoed even above all the din of battle, Raedwald's lance struck Henry's chest plate, heaving him back off his horse.

"To your feet, to your feet!" Ella called as Raedwald doubled around Henry's stunned and empty mount.

Henry staggered up and lunged toward the sideline nearest him, escaping the fray as Raedwald bore down upon him.

But there was a crowd on that side, too, and heralds—too many witnesses for Raedwald to continue to attack an unhorsed man who'd already left the field.

Ella rode around the field and reached Henry. "Are you all right?"

"I was going to ask the same of you," he responded, panting heavily, obviously still regaining his breath after having it knocked from him.

Rolf had run around on foot, his long legs carrying him nearly as swiftly as Ella had been able to navigate her horse through the crowds.

"Come on then, both of you," Rolf insisted. "To the medical tent."

Chapter Thirteen

"You are not my mother," Ella told Rolf in the deepest, most authoritative voice she could muster. "I do not need medical attention."

"I'm fine, too," Henry assured them both.

"How can you be?" Rolf asked, his eyes nearly frantic. "You flew through the air."

"Nothing's broken," Ella informed him, even though she wasn't completely sure of that fact. In any event, there was no way she could go to the medical tent. Even the most cursory examination would reveal that she was not a man. "I'm not bleeding."

"No, but your horse is," Henry told her.

This was news to Ella. She dismounted, carefully, trying not to show any sign of the pain she felt, and looked at Mirage's chest.

There was an awful scrape through her hide, longer than Ella's hand, though not terribly wide nor deep. Still, the blood flowed from it and dripped on the grass.

"Oh, Mirage." Ella placed her hand gently above the wound, trying to think how she would even bind such an inconvenient injury.

Rolf tutted over the wound. "You'll have to keep infection from setting in. That could get ugly."

Sigismund arrived then with Henry's horse in tow.

"Come on," Henry urged. "Let's get the horses back to the tent."

"Aren't you going to visit the medical tent yourselves?" Rolf asked, undeterred.

"What could they do for me there?" Ella asked. "I'm not cut open, so there's nothing to stitch closed. If I've broken a rib, they can't do a thing for me but ask me to take it easy, which I wouldn't do even under orders from a doctor."

Rolf frowned. "You're bound to have bruising. They could

give you leeches to ease the bruising."

"Why don't you run to fetch me some leeches while I attend to my horse, then?" Ella asked.

Rolf laughed at her.

Henry turned to Sigismund. "Sigi, run by the medical tent and fetch some leeches. Meet us back at our tent. Have you got that?"

"How many leeches?" Sigismund asked.

"Fifteen," Henry instructed.

Ella's eyes went wide.

Henry saw the reaction on her face. "I've got bruising, too, no doubt," he explained.

Sigismund ran off, and Rolf spotted another group of friends, and headed with them to an ale tent, leaving Henry and Ella to pick their way through the crowd, leading their horses.

"Are you quite all right?" Henry asked again.

"I'll be fine. My pride was wounded more than my body."

"Mine, too."

"Do you think it will at least dampen their anger toward us?"

"Am I still second in line for the crown?" Henry asked, leaning close so no one else would overhear.

Ella laughed, and had to catch herself quickly to make the sound low and rumbly, instead of light and rippling like a brook. "He'll hate you forever, I suppose," Ella concluded.

"And you, too, for as long as you take my side."

"Forever, then."

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

I flew above them, watching, and knew something Ella would not dare to admit to herself for a very, very long time to come.

She loved him. That is not to say she was necessarily in love with him, but she loved him with the kind of ardent devotion that would face a charging line of knights on horseback, take two lances to the chest, fly through the air, and still wonder if she couldn't do something more to keep him safe.

Knowing this, as I did, from observing the child who had been in my care since her birth, I couldn't help wondering how Henry felt about her. He saw her as a loyal friend, no doubt, and appreciated her willingness to use her skills in his defense. And he was as chivalrous as any knight who ever lived.

But did he care for her especially?

I would learn the answer to that question in surprising ways in the weeks to come.

Ah, flibbertigibbets and fairy dust! Here I go on ahead of myself again.

Where were we?

Ah, yes. Ella and Henry reached the tent, and Ella bent to inspect Mirage's wound more closely.

Henry removed the saddle from his horse, then leaned toward Ella. "There's a hot saline spring that's said to have healing properties. It's not far from the castle. Supposed to be a secret, but…I could get you there. It would be good for Mirage's cut, and your bruises."

Ella's mouth dropped open. The thought of bathing in a hot spring sounded heavenly, healing properties or not. But she couldn't think how she could get away with it with Henry along.

Perhaps she ought to tell him who she really was.

But no, he was trusting her to keep him safe. Or more accurately, he was trusting Allard. He'd feel betrayed to learn he'd put his trust in a girl. And that wasn't even taking into consideration that what she'd done was probably against the rules, even if no one had ever quite bothered to write rules against women participating in tournaments. They would if her identity was made public.

Henry set down the saddle and returned for the rest of the horse's gear. "Think about it. There's still daylight left enough to find it, though you'll have to mark the way. I can't stay long enough to lead you back again, or even stay at all. I've got a meeting with the tournament organizers. I'm on the tournament council, and besides that, Charmont is the host city and I'm its representative, so I can't be late."

Ella pulled the saddle off Mirage while Henry spoke, and exhaled audibly as she set the saddle in its spot. Though she meant to disguise the sigh as one of effort, it was actually a sigh of immense relief. "The salt springs sound like a brilliant answer. It won't be too much trouble?"

"Glad to do it. I need you and your horse in top form for next weekend's tournament in Bonn. The field will be twice as thick as it was today. Gather your bath things and a change of clothes, and we can leave as soon as you're ready."

Ella did so. She felt bad riding Mirage injured, but as Henry noted, the bleeding had slowed considerably, and didn't pick up even with Ella on Mirage's back.

They rode to the riverside, and from there, upstream toward the castle.

"Will I be trespassing?" Ella asked with hesitation as they passed a sign warning intruders away from the royal grounds.

"You do remember who I really am, don't you?" Henry asked with a laugh that was only slightly tinged with worry. "You didn't hit your head that hard, did you?"

"Of course I remember who you are. But you're not going to be with me, so…"

"It's fine. No one ever comes down here, not even my sisters, not since our mother died. It was one of our mother's favorite places. She brought us here all the time when we were young, especially if any of us took ill. But her passing has tarnished the memory of the place, and we've avoided it ever since. No one else has ever been allowed to know it exists, in order to maintain our privacy."

"Are you sure you want to show me how to find it?"

"You're not going to share the secret with anyone, are you?"

"No."

"Then it's fine. Are you taking note of the way so you can get back again?"

"We've followed the river and then the path. The path doesn't fork, does it?"

"No, but it does thin in places."

Indeed, the path narrowed as they talked, and rocks grew up in cliff sides on either side of them, until they were walking single file in a tight ravine, barely wide enough for the horses to pass without brushing the sides of the rock. There were sharp turns in several places, so that each time Ella felt certain they were about to walk into a wall of solid rock, but then it bent round abruptly to reveal the way.

The further they went, the more the air smelled of moisture and salt and other minerals, reminding Ella of the briny scent of the seaport towns she'd visited on journeys with her father. Sounds of dripping and trickling water echoed through the warm rocky chamber.

Soon the path sloped downward, and Henry ducked his head as they passed under the lip of overhanging rock.

"It's in a cave?" Ella asked.

"A grotto. Cave. Whatever you wish to call it. Can you see well enough? There's a hole in the ceiling up ahead, and light comes through again, but this stretch is dark, especially since the sun's getting low."

Ella assured him she could see the way well enough. Part of that was because I'd increased my glow a tiny smidgen (flying behind the prince's head, of course). Soon they reached a room where evening light poured through a great space in the ceiling, illuminating a rippling pool beneath. Large pillars of salty minerals hung from the ceiling and rose from the floor, in places meeting together, creating pillars of salt.

"Is it entirely safe?" Ella asked, dismounting to stand next to Henry at the water's edge.

"Oh, quite safe. You'll want to lead Mirage in and out of the water via that gentle slope, there." He pointed to where water lapped at the banks, then gestured toward the opposite end of the pool. "Just don't go up that path, there. It leads to the lower levels of the castle, mostly past the wine cellars, and up the stairs, but if you take a wrong turn you could end up in the stables or the dungeons. It's easy to get lost going that way. Are you sure you can find your way out again?"

Ella looked behind her the way they'd come. "That way?"

"Yes. And that's the way I'm going now. I'll see you back at the tent later, or in the morning. I may be late. These meetings," he yawned and shook his head. "Sometimes they go late."

Ella thanked him profusely for his help, but he hurried off.

I flew after him to make sure he was gone. When he was well out of sight, I flew back to Ella and assured her she was alone.

She was already sitting on a flat rock, peeling her pants past her feet. The top piece of her armor gave her the most trouble. I could see the pain on her face as she raised her arms above her head, and her bruises were already turning angry shades of red and purple.

Carefully, Ella led Mirage into the water. The horse was hesitant at first, and recoiled slightly when the salty water reached her cut. But then she eased forward and was soon dipping her head into the water and shaking her mane with delight.

"Ah!" Ella called to the horse as she treaded water at the deeper end of the pool. "It feels good to be weightless—and clean!"

She unbound her long blonde braid and washed her hair, combing it out in the pool before braiding it neatly and pinning it up again.

As the sun left the sky and the grotto grew dark, I grew in size and glowed more brightly, so that the cave was lit with blue fairy light. Ella relaxed, letting the pleasantly-hot water soothe her tired muscles and bruised body.

Finally, when there was no more trace of sunlight in the sky visible through the opening in the rock ceiling, Ella sighed. "If I stay here any longer, I'll fall asleep. Let's get going." She swam up beside Mirage and led her out of the pool. Then she dried off and changed into the fresh clothes she'd brought with her.

Though her bag contained the chest-compressing corset her mother had devised, Ella's bruised chest was in too much pain to even consider wearing it. She layered a vest over a couple of

shirts, and decided that would have to be enough. After all, it was night, and by the time she reached the camp, many of the torches would have already been extinguished for the night.

Hopefully no one would see her, or look close enough to notice anything unusual.

While Ella dressed, I fluttered around, lighting up whatever space she needed—inside her bag, next to her feet as she pulled on her boots, the area on the ground where she'd dressed, as she made sure she hadn't left any belongings behind.

Once she was sure she had everything, Ella looked up and announced, "Okay, Mirage. Let's go."

I looked up, too, but there was no whinny of response, no impatient shake of the mane.

Mirage was nowhere to be seen.

"Mirage?" Ella called, but the cave echoed back the horse's name, swallowing the sound under dripping and trickling noises.

I flew to the spot where Mirage had stood on the flat rocky outcropping after Ella had led her from the pool. Slick water stained the rocks where it had dripped from her mane and tail, and wet hoof prints led away from the spot.

Ella scrambled over to stand beside me. "Looks like she went this way."

I flew low, illuminating the wet hoof prints along a wide expanse of rock that led in the direction Henry had warned her not to go. I could see the opening of the tunnel up ahead.

Wet hoof prints led into the tunnel.

"Oh, Mirage, you didn't," Ella groaned. "I suppose she smelled hay, or horses, if the stables are up that way." She stepped closer, and peered inside the dark opening.

Hesitantly, I flew just inside the opening, swelling in size and increasing my glow to brighten the dark tunnel. I'd hoped to see Mirage just inside the tunnel, but the wet hoof prints were the only trace of her we could see.

"Let's hurry to find her," Ella suggested.

Collywobbles and couscous! I wasn't keen on entering the tunnel. Henry had warned us not to, after all. But there really

wasn't any way around it, not unless we wanted to abandon Mirage.

So I flew ahead bravely (you may think flying up a tunnel isn't very brave, but because of Henry's warning I was terrified of what we might find ahead, and any time you have to fly headlong into your fears, you're being brave, even if to everyone else it just looks like flying up a tunnel). Ella hurried after me almost at a run, until we came to the first fork, with one route brunching off to our right, and the other to our left.

We both looked down, and then behind us.

At some point in her journey, Mirage had air-dried enough that she no longer left a trail of tail-drips or hoof prints.

"Which way?" Ella whispered, and sniffed at the tunnels, hoping to catch a whiff of wet horse or stable or something that might give her a hint of which way to go. She looked at me, uncertainty on her face.

"We don't dare split up," I told her. "You need my light."

"Let's take them as they come, then. To the left first, then to the right."

I plunged into the darkness of the tunnel on the left. It was a sharp left, as though the tunnel was meant to connect, not with the corridor to the cavern at all, but to the tunnel on the right. The route to the grotto seemed to branch off to the side of those.

Perhaps that should have given us a clue about where we were going, but we didn't have time to think through the sensible routes that might connect the points under the castle. We just wanted to find Mirage and get back to our tent.

I did not feel brave at all. I felt terrified, but I wasn't sure if my fear stemmed from some sense that we'd taken the wrong trail, or because I knew we were trespassing somewhere we weren't supposed to be.

Or perhaps, on some vaguely magical level, I'd picked up on the spirit of the place we were flying toward. It was a place of pain, stained by the criminals who had inhabited the subterranean space over the centuries.

The tunnel opened up to a small chamber, with anterooms

branching off from that, partitioned apart by iron bars.

Shackles hung from some of the walls.

Thankfully, the chamber was uninhabited.

"Mirage couldn't have come through here," Ella noted in a tiny whisper. "She wouldn't fit past those bars."

We sprinted back down the way we'd come. Ella paused at the junction. "Grotto," she noted, pointing down the tunnel we'd come through before. Then she pointed to the third route. "This way."

We hurried on, shortly coming to another juncture.

Ella groaned. "To the left, again, I guess," she offered, so I flew that direction.

We hadn't gone far when we reached what were obviously the wine cellars. Barrels were stacked in rows, clay jars mounted on special holding shelves, and empty wine bottles for serving filled the shelves.

Not that we lingered long enough to see much. It was clear Mirage couldn't have entered the cramped space—not without knocking over barrels and jars as she squeezed through.

Without a word, Ella and I turned and sprinted back the way we'd come, taking the final branch so quickly, Ella nearly fell into the stables once we reached them.

Mirage stood next to a pair of other horses, chewing hay. She looked up at us calmly, oblivious to our frantic search on her behalf.

Ella glanced around, checking to be sure no one would see her. Then she darted forward, grabbed Mirage by her halter, and turned back to the tunnel. Mirage snatched another mouthful of hay, then followed obediently.

It was a long walk back to camp. By the time Ella reached the tent, the torches were burning low, and those of many nearby tents had already been extinguished for the evening. Ella peeled back the curtain at the doorway and peeked her head inside.

Sigismund lay in heavy sleep on his pallet.

Henry sat up straight. "Allard?" he whispered.

"Yes. Sorry I'm late."

"Did you get lost?" Henry clambered to his feet and came outside to chat with Ella as she tied Mirage to the hitching post and made sure she'd have plenty of fresh hay and water.

Sigismund had stocked everything aplenty.

"Mirage got lost," Ella explained as she tugged her boots from her tired feet, wincing as the bruises on her chest complained at the effort. She quickly told Henry the story of Mirage's misguided trip. By the time she reached the part about Mirage grabbing a final bite of hay for the road, both she and Henry were laughing.

"Oh, Mirage," Henry snorted through his laughter.

Mirage looked up at him, blinked, and went back to her hay.

"I'm sorry if you stayed up late waiting for us," Ella apologized.

"I'd only just returned myself, and I wasn't even to bed properly. I was trying to put the leeches on my bruises, and having quite a time reaching my back. If you help me with mine, I could help you with yours." Henry held out a packet of something that looked like squirming raw liver in the darkness.

Ella stared at the leeches and thought quickly. She couldn't let Henry help her.

"I can help you, of course," Ella offered, and reached for the packet of leeches.

Henry tugged his shirt off over his head, revealing bruises that were already turning from a deep red to a mottled purple.

"Ouch," Ella commiserated.

"I'm sure your chest looks the same."

"Oh, yes," Ella agreed. "Exactly."

Henry had already put leeches on the front bruises, so he turned his back to her. "Can you see where it's worst?"

"It's quite obvious," Ella assured him, placing a leech on a dark swollen patch. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"It's tender," Henry acknowledged, "but I'll be fine. Much better once the leeches do their work."

Ella placed three more leeches on Henry's back, then announced, "Those are the worst spots as far as I can see. Did I

miss any?"

"That's the worst of it." Henry slipped his shirt back on over his head. "How about you?"

"I'll get mine. There aren't any I can't reach. I did an inventory of them at the grotto—which eased the pain significantly, so thank you again for telling me about the place."

"No problem. You're sure you'll be okay?"

"Fine. Get some sleep."

"You, too. I'll tell you in the morning what we discussed at the tournament council meeting."

"Oh? Something interesting?"

"We talked about you," Henry told her, and ducked back through the curtain to his bed.

Chapter Fourteen

Ella watched the curtain fall into place after Henry. She half expected him to poke his head out again and explain further what he meant, but by the time she shook off her surprise and stepped inside, he was in his bed with his back to her.

She slipped quietly behind the curtain to her side of the tent, applied the leeches to the places she needed them (I gave her a bit of help with her back, but I kept my glow down so no one would see me), and fell promptly to sleep.

In the morning she awoke before anyone else, peeled off her leeches, and got her corset in place over her chest, though she couldn't stand to cinch it too tightly because of the pain. By the time she dressed and rolled up the curtain that separated her sleeping quarters from the main part of the tent, Henry was awake and riffling through the food chest for their breakfast stores.

"Do you mind starting the morning fire?" Henry asked. "There's a tinderbox by the door."

"I've seen it." Ella stopped to grab the box on her way out.

She dug out the fire hole, arranged tinder and kindling, and crouched low with the fire striker, aiming it so the sparks would hit the tinder. She'd lit fires plenty of times on the road with her father, and quite often at Madame De Bouchard's—the woman was awful about letting her fires go out.

The breeze was just enough to fan the flame but not enough to put it out. Ella got the spark to catch, then fed in small sticks, adding larger ones as the flame grew.

"You're quite good at that," Henry observed.

Ella startled, then laughed at herself for startling. "I didn't hear you step outside," she explained.

"I was just waiting for the fire to get big enough to start the coffee."

"If you're here to watch it, I'm going to run to the latrine."

"Take the bucket on your way. We need fresh water."

"Good idea."

By the time Ella returned with fresh water, Henry not only had eggs in the pan, they were halfway done cooking.

"What did they talk about?" Ella asked, having wondered since his cryptic statement the evening before.

"Hmm?" He turned the eggs, and for a moment looked like he honestly didn't know what she was referring to.

"At your meeting last night—you said they talked about me. Or were you only joking?"

"Ah, yes, they talked about you. They talked about what you did—how you were unhorsed, but then turned right around and leapt up on Einhard's horse."

Ella's eyes widened, as they often did when she felt afraid. "Am I in trouble? They're not going to ban me from competing, are they?" The thought made her head spin. If she couldn't compete, what would she do? Would she have to go back and serve Madame De Bouchard? The thought made her blood nearly freeze in her veins.

"No, no. They're not banning anyone, not today. Most of them were very impressed." He got out two plates and served up their eggs.

"Impressed? I thought it might count as cheating."

"That's what some of the men said last night. That's why the meeting went on so long. But some of the wise ones reminded us of why we fight in tournaments—to practice the necessary skills for battle. In battle, if you're unhorsed, you're usually as good as dead. That's why the mounted melee eliminates men when they're unhorsed. But if you can get back on a horse, like you did, in battle, you're not dead. So the discussion centered around the idea that maybe, if a man can get on a horse again, he won't be disqualified after all."

Ella understood the practical application for wartime, but it created problems in tournament play. "But you can't have men on their feet in the midst of the horses. They'll get trampled."

"That was also part of the discussion." Henry scooped up a spoonful of eggs. "My argument was, you wouldn't have many

men who'd stick around on the field to try it, because they couldn't do it anyway. That's a rare skill you have."

"I grew up around horses. I can do more than just that."

"I'd like to see what you can do." Henry smiled at her.

For a moment, Ella just looked at him. He had nice teeth. A nice smile, really.

Henry cleared his throat. "Perhaps along the road. We'll leave for Bonn as soon as we break camp."

Ella nodded. She'd taken a mouthful of eggs and didn't feel it would be polite to talk (Madame De Bouchard threw fits when her daughters talked with food in their mouths). But she'd noticed that some of the men had packed up and left already. She and Henry had slept in a bit after their late night. Sigismund had already risen, though she hadn't seen him yet that morning.

Jerome was, of course, still sleeping.

She finally swallowed her bite of eggs. "Tell me what we need to do to break camp."

With Henry's guidance, as they finished their coffee, they tore down the tent from around Jerome (who snored on until the morning clouds broke, and the warm sunlight hit his face). Sigismund arrived with a cart and horse, and Henry checked over the equipment to make sure everything was hitched correctly.

"You got the yoke secured properly this time," Henry observed, complementing the boy.

"A stable hand helped me," Sigismund admitted, looking up at Henry through low-hanging straw-like hair.

"Better to do it with help than do it wrong," Henry pronounced. "Have you head breakfast?"

"I stopped at the sausage vendor's tent."

"You're going to use up all your pay before the week's out. We have food here."

"Not sausages."

Henry chuckled and shook his head. "Let's get loaded. If we can be ready to leave before the sausage vendor closes up shop, I'll buy you lunch there."

Sigismund grinned and burst into action, packing and loading items with a precision that was, if not exactly up to the skill level of Ella and Henry, still quite impressive for an eight-year-old. Henry made good on his promise of sausages, and the four of them struck out on the road to Bonn. Ella rode Mirage, Henry rode Bastian, and Sigismund drove the cart while Jerome dozed on the seat beside him.

It was a busy route, but not crowded. The bulk of the travelers had either left earlier that morning, or wouldn't head out for another day or two. As they topped hills, Ella could see other parties on the road ahead of them, but there wasn't anyone close enough to be a nuisance.

"How about those riding skills of yours?" Henry asked once they'd finished their sausages.

Ella didn't say a word, but pulled her feet up onto her saddle, getting them steady underneath her, soles flat against the saddle, with her body in a crouch, before standing upright, still holding Mirage's reigns.

Mirage was familiar with the move, and didn't falter, but continued on at the same pace.

Henry clapped, and Sigismund cheered.

Jerome, who tended to be dour in the mornings, raised one eyebrow, then went back to dozing.

"Ride up alongside me," Ella directed Henry.

He looked wary, but brought Bastian up even with Mirage. The two horses synchronized their steps, hooves hitting the earth in rhythmic unison.

Ella touched her right foot to Bastian's back.

The horse didn't falter.

Gradually, Ella put more weight on that foot, until she was standing evenly between the two horses.

Sigismund cheered and clapped, and Henry looked up at her warily.

She placed one hand on Henry's shoulder. Still holding Mirage's reins, she lifted her left foot and brought it over to Bastian's back. She rode that way a moment more before reversing the moves and stepping back onto Mirage. Finally,

she crouched down again, then sat in the saddle as she had in the beginning.

"Impressive," Henry complimented her. "But I don't know that it would do you any good in the melee."

Ella laughed. "No, I don't think it would. Still, you asked to see my skills. Here's another one."

She leapt off her mare and ran ahead down the hill (the horses were walking to match the speed of the cart, which couldn't go very fast). When she reached the bottom of the valley, she whistled to Mirage, who broke pace to a trot, bearing down on Ella almost as though to trample her.

But as the horse approached her, Ella ran, almost meeting her pace, planted her hands just behind the mare's mane, and threw her leg up and over the horse's back, pulling herself on.

Sigismund and Henry clapped again, and Ella called back, "Now you run up alongside me."

Henry didn't hesitate, but urged Bastian forward.

Ella got her feet up under her in a crouch again and rode, her neck craned to watch their approach from behind her. She let go of Mirage's reins this time as Bastian pulled even with her, and she sprang to the side, landing on the bare stretch of Bastian's back, behind Henry's saddle.

She grabbed Henry's arm to steady herself.

He laughed from the thrill of it, and also with relief that she hadn't fallen. "Now that," he pronounced, still chuckling, "is a trick that would be useful in the melee."

And so the journey went. Ella showed off a few more variations of her tricks—sliding back into Mirage's saddle from Bastian's back, mounting Bastian from standing with Henry still on his back, leaping onto either horse from various parts of the moving cart—and then, at Henry's insistence, she tried to teach him how to perform the same tricks.

He had considerable strength and skill, and confessed to already knowing how to mount a moving horse, though he'd not done it at such speed before. He was an able learner, though not as agile as Ella, especially with the standing skills.

"I don't know if I could ever ride standing," he confessed,

rising to no more than a high crouch before collapsing back into his saddle.

Ella laughed at him. "I can shoot an arrow at a target while riding standing."

"Then your horse is steadier than mine," Henry told her.

At that, Ella hopped from Mirage to the cart, dug out a bow and a quiver of arrows, and called to Henry, "Give me your horse a moment. I'll show you."

By this time Jerome was awake, and offered to bet Sigismund three silver coins that Allard wouldn't be able to hit his mark.

"I haven't got more than two silver coins," Sigismund told him. "But he can do it, if anyone can."

Henry overheard them as he clambered off Bastian's back and onto the cart. "Three silver coins to all of you, and supper at the finest tavern we can find, if Allard can hit the mark I name."

Ella grinned, eager for the challenge. She strung the bow, climbed onto Bastian's back, and fitted an arrow to the bowstring.

When Henry pointed to a branch hanging over the roadway far ahead, and indicated a leaf that drooped lower than the rest, Ella laughed at him.

"That's not even that difficult."

"Do it, then."

So Ella did.

The arrow, of course, flew straight through the leaf.

Jerome, who may not have understood that Henry's bet didn't require Jerome to pay anyone no matter how Allard shot, protested that the shot had missed.

"It tore a hole clean through the leaf," Henry explained to him.

Still standing on Bastian's back, Ella urged the horse to trot ahead faster. She slowed the stallion as she reached the branch and snapped off the lower portion, purposely not touching the leaf in question, so that none of them could accuse her of tampering with it.

The horse cart caught up to her, and she tossed the piece of branch onto Jerome's lap.

"There's a hole in the leaf," she told him, and then went to fetch the arrow.

So they had dinner at a tavern that evening, and slept at the inn instead of pitching their tent. There Ella heard, for the first time, Jerome's singing, which wasn't so terribly awful until the dogs began to howl, and then several large men threatened to sit on his face until he died for want of air, so he shut up.

It took them three days to reach Bonn, and along the way Ella and Henry practiced at fighting, as well as riding tricks.

It wasn't until the second day that Ella decided to show off her skill of dismounting from Mirage with a back handspring.

She landed on her feet on the dusty road. Sigismund applauded with great enthusiasm, and even Jerome clapped his hands together a few times.

Henry applauded as well, but he shook his head as she remounted and fell into pace beside him. "Aren't you afraid you might land wrong, and hit your head or break your neck and die?"

Ella considered his question, and thought of the long days toiling away at Madame De Bouchard's estate, when her stolen moments riding in the field were her only opportunity to feel as though she was anything more than Madame De Bouchard's work horse.

"I am afraid," she admitted. "But I'm more afraid of not living, than of dying."

Chapter Fifteen

The days began to run into weeks, and they fell into a rhythm—traveling, competing, traveling, competing again. There was little to separate out one tournament from another. Sometimes they did well. Other times, they were thrown, and Ella had to hide her pain as well as her bruises.

It wasn't always easy for her to hide who she was, especially because most of the larger tournaments had dances, and she found it difficult to come up with excuses not to attend. The dances included feasts, and some went just for the food. Even Sigismund and Jerome looked forward to the events, and couldn't understand why Allard's aching ribs or need for sleep took precedence over the celebrations.

Perhaps she could have figured out a way to go, though she had no appropriate clothes for such an event, but her biggest reason for avoiding the dances was that, with the camp nearly emptied as its occupants attended the dance, they provided her best chance at bathing in private.

The tournament grounds, and especially the camping fields, were nearly always located by a lake, river, or major stream, which served to provide water as well as a place for those who wished to avoid the expense of the local bathhouse, to bathe. Not only did Ella place a priority on bathing (a position which, judging from the scent of them, many of the men did not share), but she wished to do so with as much privacy as she could manage.

Though Henry never insisted she attend the dances, he tended to take Sigismund and Jerome's side, and when she insisted, time and again, that she was too tired or hurt to go, he countered by telling her, "You may miss this one, but you've got to go to the ball in Paris."

"The ball?" Ella asked, unsure what elevated the Paris dance to higher level nomenclature.

"It's the grandest affair," Jerome offered. "Free ale and

wine—all you can drink!"

"And sausages," Sigismund added. "All you can eat."

Ella still wasn't clear on how that made it a ball and not just a dance.

"And it's a masquerade," Henry noted. "A masked ball."

"Masked?"

"Yes, everyone wears masks so you don't know who they are!" Sigismund said.

"Brilliant idea. They're less likely to turn you away for drinking too much if they can only see half your face," Jerome informed her.

"If you only go to one ball all season, Paris is the one to attend," Henry said.

Ella nodded solemnly, but protested, "I don't own a mask."

Sigismund laughed.

Henry shrugged. "They'll have plain ones at the door if you need one, but all the shops downtown will do masks to match your suit. And the costumeries rent out ensembles. If you go in earlier in the week, they'll have your outfit made ready to fit you by Saturday."

"Isn't that expensive?" Ella protested. She had money—Henry had paid her every Friday when he paid Jerome and Sigismund—but she'd been saving as much as she could to take home to her parents. She took seriously her father's financial concerns, and actually felt good about having something to contribute. She didn't want to blow it all on something as frivolous as a dance.

But Henry shook his head. "Far less expensive than buying clothes. Are you afraid you can't afford it? Come on, I'll chip in. You've got to go."

They urged her like this every week, so that by the time they arrived in Paris, Ella not only wanted desperately to attend, but she'd come up with a plan for doing so.

They'd come straight from the tournament at Melun, and since the town was close enough, they'd made the trip in a single day, Henry having risen early in spite of late meetings the evening before (the tournament council was still stuck on

the re-mounting issue—the fact that Allard had done it again the week before only divided them all the more).

Henry was quite pleased with their travel time, and when Ella began to help with the unpacking and pitching of camp, he waved her off. "Sigi and Jerome can handle everything. This is Paris. Go—see the town before the sun sets."

Ella had hoped to sneak away the next day, but since they'd arrived ahead of the bulk of the tournament crowd (many others had taken advantage of the short distance and decided to rest up in Melun another day or two before setting off), she realized her best chance of visiting a costumery without being recognized, was to go now.

So she grabbed her bag and her money and headed to town. Even as a girl who'd traveled extensively, from Rome to Constantinople to Beijing, Paris amazed and impressed her. The architecture, the shops—the variety of goods sold in the shops—it was almost enough to distract her from her goal.

But she'd noticed many dress shops, and some advertising specifically the rental of ball gowns for the upcoming masquerade, so she ducked into an empty alley and pulled a skirt from her bag. She changed quickly, lest anyone come upon her, freeing her bosom from the corset and her braid from its cap. Then she shook her shoulders to free them from their manly set, and tried her best to walk into the dress shop like a lady.

As she'd hoped, the women in the shop were eager for the expected influx of tournament customers, and since Ella was on the front end of the rush, they practically fell upon her in their eagerness.

Their Parisian dialect was different from Ella's native tongue, but Madame De Bouchard had taught her the basics of their language. Most importantly, they understood she had money and wanted to rent a gown for the ball. Beyond that, all they had to do was hold up dresses until Ella spotted one she liked.

I was hovering above it all, and I won't pretend I wasn't enjoying the fuss. The perfumed shop with its silks and laces

was a far step up from the usual throngs of stinky men and horses.

Ella's face lit up when she saw the dress, a deep indigo purple with silver lace trim.

The shop ladies saw her face light up, too, and bustled her into a changing room.

When Ella emerged a few minutes later to stand before their great polished bronze mirrors, no man from the tournament would ever have recognized her as Allard, even without a mask.

She was a vision.

Even the shop girls, who I am sure had dressed many a lovely lady, stood an awe at Ella's transformation. They gave her almost a full minute of standing in front of the mirror, marveling and turning from side to side, before they sprang to work cinching undergarments tighter, pinning seams, measuring this and that, and pulling out coordinating accessories.

Ella picked out a silver mask and silver shoes, and a jewelry set consisting of a necklace of silver with sapphires, and wide cuff bracelets of the same design. This last she wasn't sure she could afford, but the ladies named their price, and since it wouldn't dip into her savings too deeply, she decided to rent the jewelry, too.

Maybe it was the way their dialect matched Madame De Bouchard's, or perhaps it was because the last time Ella had admired her reflection standing in a dress before a mirror, she'd been wearing the dresses Agatha and Bertha later stole. Whatever the case, renting the ensemble made her feel restored in some way, like she was rebuilding something of what had been taken from her.

Ella made sure she understood exactly when and how she'd need to pick up and return her things, paid her initial deposit, and thanked everyone before ducking into an alleyway and turning herself back into a man.

When she reached camp, Henry asked what she'd seen, and she admitted she'd stopped at a shop to look into renting

something to wear to the ball.

"Did you place a rental order?" Henry asked. "Are you planning to attend?"

Ella felt a blush rise to her face, and forced her voice extra deep to compensate. "I did, actually. I am."

Before she'd quite finished talking, Sigismund and Jerome cheered.

Henry laughed and shook his head. "All right, boys. You won the bet. I owe you dinner."

It wasn't until the next day that Ella admitted to Henry that she didn't want to participate in the mounted melee on Saturday. This was largely because she knew she'd need time to dress for the ball—and in secret, too—and also because the mounted melee had always been the event where she was most likely to be injured, and after the way the women at the dress shop had laced her corset tight, she didn't even want to think about picking up any new bruises before the ball.

But she couldn't tell Henry any of that, so she simply said, "I'd rather not do the mounted melee on Saturday. My remounting has been causing such a fuss. I think it would be best—"

But Henry didn't let her finish. "I want you in the melee, and I want you to remount."

Ella's mouth fell open. He'd completely reversed his position. The last time he'd expressed any real preference on her participation, he'd urged her not to do the melee at all.

But that had been weeks and weeks before, at Bonn, when he'd still felt bad about her injuries from the week before that.

"Your—your meetings," Ella stammered. "They go long. You've complained—"

"I've complained because Raedwald and some of the men who side with him are dragging on the argument. Good sense would tell any man that remounting is an advantageous skill for battle, and therefore one we should encourage, not prohibit. They're mostly mad because you've made them look like fools every time you've done it. They want you punished."

"And you want me to do it again?" Ella had to force her

voice into a lower octave. It wanted to gasp and squeak.

"If they can see the benefit—"

"But Raedwald's supporters are powerful, especially in this area. Aren't we close to his mother's ancestral lands?"

"Indeed. And his maternal uncles are part of the problem. That's why we need to do something visible, something dramatic."

"*We*? What are you doing about it?"

"I'm fighting for you at council."

"And I'm the one getting thrown from a horse and nearly trampled. Who's doing the fighting?"

"We both are, Allard. We are both using the skills and advantages given to us—"

But Ella was furious, and not inclined to listen. She'd just put down a large chunk of her savings on a dress, and if she did as Henry asked, she might never get a chance to wear it—or she'd be so bruised her chest would match her dress. "Why can't I argue at council and you remount in battle?"

Henry's expression softened slightly. "Do you want to argue at council?"

She'd have preferred for him to offer to remount in battle. The thought of addressing a group of men, who would all be sitting there scrutinizing her, when she wasn't in her armor and didn't have chain mail over her face…well, it sounded dangerous for a girl who didn't want to be found out. Irresponsible, even.

"No. I do not want to argue, and I do not want to fight. Can't I miss one mounted melee?"

Henry rubbed his hands over his face. When he pulled them away, he looked tired. Older, even. "Raedwald's been talking."

"When doesn't he?" Ella asked, but Henry ignored her and continued.

"He's upset that the council is considering changing the rules on your account. They're not listening to him. They're siding with me, and he's furious. He's said, if you remount in battle once more, and they do nothing to punish you, he'll leave

and go back to the eastern circuit."

Ella had heard rumors, too. "He's also said he wants to throw me in the stocks," she told Henry. "That if I remount in the melee again, he'll have me publicly flogged. Do you want that?"

"I want him gone, and this is the best way. If he leaves, I can compete without fear of being killed by him. It will be safer for both of us."

"What, then? I'm supposed to get injured—"

"So that I may live. Yes. I believe that was our original arrangement. You would fight for me so that I would not be killed." Henry looked at her with weary eyes.

Ella blew out a long, slow breath.

The only way to remount in the melee was to first be knocked from her horse, which meant bruises. On top of that, Raedwald had threatened all manner of awful things against her if she did it again.

But Henry was right. If Raedwald killed him, Richard would be second in line for the throne.

She couldn't let it come to that.

"Fine," she concluded in a voice made deep by disappointment. "I'll fight. I'll remount, and I'll endure whatever happens after." She turned her back on him, then, and walked over to Mirage.

"Where are you going?" Henry asked.

"For a ride," Ella said simply as she untied the horse. Mirage was already saddled, so she hoisted herself onto the mare's back and rode away.

I grabbed hold of her cap and held on tight. Ella rode free of the camp, found an empty stretch of road along the Seine, and gave Mirage her head.

Mirage hadn't been allowed to run freely in some days, and spread out low, sprinting, while Ella clung to her neck, buried her face in her mane, and cried.

Once the horse grew tired of running and slowed to a walk, I grew fat as a mouse and sat in Mirage's mane, looking up at Ella.

"Why are you crying?" I asked her.

Ella looked at me like the question was a stupid one, but she still tried to answer it. "Agatha and Bertha took all my pretty dresses. I never even got to wear them. Then I no sooner spend half my savings on renting a gown, when I find out I'm probably going to be too bruised to wear it. Am I never going to get a chance to look pretty?"

"I thought you wanted to be a boy?"

"Yes, well, I'm not one, am I? And yet I can't have any of the advantages of being a girl, either. It's not fair."

"No, it's not. Nothing about life is ever fair," I agreed. As a fairy, I consider myself an expert on all things fair.

Life is not one of those things.

"Ugh!" Ella nearly screamed. "I wonder if it's too late to get my money back on the dress."

"Why would you want to, Dear?"

"Because I'm not going to be able to wear it."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to be all bruised! Have you seen the neckline on the dress? My bruises will show, on my upper chest and back. Don't you think people might wonder how I got them? It won't take them long to figure it out, then. Besides that, I'll look awful. And it will hurt getting knocked off the horse. It always hurts terribly, for days and days afterward."

"Is there no way around that?"

Ella looked up at the sky and searched the clouds, which were gloriously white and fluffy, indifferent to her despair below. "He wants me to remount. I can't do that unless I'm unhorsed first, which means bruises. There's no way around the bruises."

"Isn't there?" I flew up higher, since Ella was still searching the sky, and I looked into her eyes, challenging her.

She looked completely clueless, so I gave her a hint. "I've seen you dismount your horse a dozen different ways."

Realization sparked behind Ella's eyes, but she shook her head, denying the truth I'd prompted. "I can't dismount and then remount."

"Why can't you? Dismounting isn't against the rules. In fact, if you dismount, then they can't claim you were ever knocked off at all. You wouldn't be eliminated before remounting, so you'd be within the bounds of the rules." I was buzzing with the excitement of my plan.

Ella was half cross-eyed from looking at me flying so close to her face. She shook her head rapidly and grappled with my idea.

"If I dismount without being hit," she whispered, as though the very thought was too dangerous to speak aloud, "I wouldn't have any bruises."

This time when she looked up at the clouds, there was desperate joy straining through the hope on her face. "I could do it. I could do what Henry asked me to. Raedwald would be furious. He might well make good on his threat to leave for the eastern circuit. That would keep Henry safe, which is all I ever wanted in the first place, besides the chance to fight."

"And, you could make history. They might change the rules for you," I added.

"Maybe," Ella acknowledged. "I don't care whether they do or not. Now I've got to figure out the best way to dismount with a lance in one hand and a sword in the other and a line of cavalry bearing down on me. There's going to be no benefit to any of it if I'm trampled to death."

So she practiced. Indeed, she spent the entire week practicing, so that when Saturday came, and she was tired from her other events, and feeling slightly discouraged after both she and Henry had been eliminated early from the foot melee (and their side had gone on to lose), she was nonetheless prepared to do whatever she could to fulfill her promise to Henry.

"Are you ready?" Henry asked as they were lining up. Raedwald and the Ulsters were positioned across from Ella. She didn't even try to avoid them.

Ella nodded. She'd let Henry in on her practice plans since she needed a horse riding opposite her.

Bastian had faltered the first few times when she'd planted the tip of her lance in the ground and vaulted over him, high in

the air, but he'd eventually gotten used to seeing her soar past his head.

These other horses wouldn't have that advantage, though. She had no way of knowing how they might react. And since she was purposely unhorsing herself—intentionally becoming vulnerable to being trampled—that uncertainty made her distinctly nervous, no matter how many times she'd successfully vaulted over Bastian's head.

The herald in the middle of the field shouted the rules, and Ella listened attentively, noting, with satisfaction, that he said, "If you're removed from your horse, you must leave the field."

No one was going to remove her from her horse, not if she executed her stunt correctly.

Her heart felt as though it was going to pound its way out past her chest plate. She was always nervous before the mounted melee, especially with Raedwald and the Ulsters glaring silent death-threats at her from across the field, but today was worse. She gripped her lance and left the sword in the scabbard at her side.

The herald finished his speech and darted to the sidelines as the trumpets blared.

Mirage burst forward at that signal, and Ella counted the beats of her hooves against the turf.

Raedwald and his men rode forward at much the same pace that Bastian had approached her when they'd practiced. She'd timed her maneuver to that pace.

She had her feet under her, soles braced against the saddle, in Mirage's first three strides. Two more strides, and she stood, lance level, the lances of the opposing team members no more than two strides away.

She lowered the tip, planted it in the earth with both hands, and launched herself over the heads of the approaching horses.

Except that those stallions had never seen such a thing, and three of them reared up in alarm, pawing the air above their heads with their hooves.

Chapter Sixteen

Ella felt the churning air and the hot breath of the frantic horses as she flew above them, rotating as she landed so that when her feet hit the trampled turf, she stood facing the horses she'd just flown over.

Einhard was the first to get his mount turned around, and he pointed his lance at her, but there wasn't room for him to build up any speed.

Ella pulled her sword and thrust Einhard's lance to the side as he rode past.

Uliad was next. He came with sword drawn. She blocked his blow with her lance and pushed hard. He wobbled in his saddle, but did not fall.

Still, his wobbling gave her pause. She'd been about to hoist herself onto his horse, but she'd need him to be secure in his seat. If he tumbled out, she'd likely fall with him, and that would do nothing to achieve the goal Henry had set. She let him pass by.

She needed a mount and she needed it soon, but she'd trained Mirage to ride on through, past the danger zone of the fighting, and indeed, her horse now stood a stone's throw away, much too far for Ella to attempt to reach her through the thick of the fighting.

The longer she stayed on her feet, the greater the danger of being trampled or speared through.

But the next mount to approach her was Raedwald's.

He charged at her, eyes furious above the chain-mail curtain that covered the lower half of his face.

Raedwald carried his lance in his left hand and his sword in his right. With only one hand to support the entire weight of his lance, and that growing weary from holding it steady through the initial charge, a turn, and a counter-charge, his lance arm would be his weakest point.

Ella lunged to that side.

Raedwald followed her movements with the tip of his lance, keeping it aimed at her chest.

Ella tried to step back, out of his way, but there was another horse behind her, and she was at risk of getting kicked as it was.

Crossing her sword and lance together in a very unconventional X-block above her head, she caught the tip of the lance and thrust it wide, trusting that the strength of both her arms combined would be enough to leverage the lance away.

It was.

Raedwald roared and pulled his mount up sharp, preparing to double back for her.

But Ella had already sprung forward, scrambling to climb onto the horse behind Raedwald. Both of her hands were full with the lance and her sword, and she'd expected Raedwald to continue moving. She'd timed her leap with the expectation that his body would be out of her way, and she'd land directly behind him.

Raedwald had pulled up his horse so sharply, he wasn't out of her way at all. He was in her way as she shoved lance and sword upward and lunged after them to mount.

There was nowhere for her to go but on top of him. The horses all around her were pressing in. It wasn't safe on the ground, so she threw herself forward, expecting to land, with some jostling, behind him.

After all, Raedwald was a big guy. He was almost never dismounted.

Almost. Never.

Whether it was the sharp turn or his surprise, or if she'd set him off-balance when she'd shoved his lance away, Raedwald couldn't keep his seat. He tumbled back as she took his horse.

The last she saw of Raedwald, he was lying on his back in the trampled sod, red-faced and screaming in fury.

Raedwald's horse was much bigger than Mirage or even Bastian. The animal was also clearly trained to find the heat of battle and dive into it. Ella recovered quickly from her surprise

and used her lance to unseat Uliad, who was still a tad wobbly, and who hadn't seemed to realize his master's horse had taken a new rider, and thus was not expecting the attack.

Uliad joined Raedwald as he ran for the safety of the sidelines.

Einhard turned on Ella, screaming for revenge. He came at her on her sword side, and she locked blades with him. She'd fought him at swords before and knew his weaknesses. Their blades clashed repeatedly, cutting the air, horses prancing backward and lunging forward again, as their riders struck and jabbed. Ella finally took him through sheer endurance, pushing him back as he weakened, until she pulled herself onto her knees in the saddle and kicked him off his horse with one foot.

He fell with a wail.

Ella slid back into her seat and surveyed the field for the first time.

Henry was gone, watching from the sidelines, holding Mirage by the reins as he sat atop Bastian. Indeed, it appeared her team was taking the worst of it, save for her action against Raedwald.

She'd have liked to hop off the horse and be done, but her men were outnumbered. They needed her.

Three riders from the red team had one of her men surrounded. She lowered her lance and urged Raedwald's horse forward.

The stallion didn't seem to care who was riding him. He lowered his head and plowed into the skirmish.

The men didn't even see her coming until it was too late. Her lance hit one in the chest and flung him back off his horse. She ran past him, turned her mount, and swept back to pick off another.

This time, the rider saw her coming and held his lance to strike.

Ella saw it and nearly pulled the stallion up sharp. She had not spent all week practicing to vault from horseback only to gain a horrific bruise now.

She thrust her lance forward, clipping his lance a moment

before it reached her chest, and shoving it wide, throwing the rider sideways as she did so.

He tumbled from his horse.

By this time Ella was exhausted, but so were the others. She surveyed the list and spotted two swordsmen sparring midfield. Neither held a lance.

Easy pickings.

She swept the man from the other team from his horse with a sideways brush of her lance. The stallion she rode hadn't gone any faster than a trot.

By this time the teams were nearly even. Ella paused to catch her breath. She didn't see any more riders who would be easily picked off. She almost didn't see the rider headed toward her from her left side, but I buzzed at her ear and she turned her head in time to get her lance up. With a hard backward jerk of the reins, she pulled Raedwald's horse backward, narrowly missing the attacking weapon, and clapping the rider sideways with her lance as he rode past.

He wobbled in his saddle, so she urged her mount after him, and walloped him again with the lance, sending him toppling to the ground.

While Ella finished off the rest of the red team, Raedwald and the Ulster brothers were raging on the sidelines, screaming that Allard wasn't eligible to continue, that none of his victories should count, and that he ought to be barred from future competitions. But the officials were still recovering from watching Allard vault over the enemy line, and their awe at his skills made them think he ought to be praised rather than punished.

It wasn't until Ella and two of her teammates remained, alone, on the uncontested field that the trumpets blew, signaling the end of the melee.

Ella leapt from the stallion's back and ran to where Henry held Mirage.

She mounted her horse before anyone could approach intending to tackle her.

Henry shook his head, his expression an unreadable

confusion of awe and worry and shock.

"How did I do?" Ella asked him, panting from the effort of all she'd done.

"You won. We won." Henrys words were hollowed out by amazement.

"Is that good?" Ella clarified, still unsure whether Henry was happy or upset.

Henry shook his head. "I think it may be. We'll find out tonight." He glanced at the field in time to see Raedwald and the Ulsters reclaiming their horses. "You might want to get going. They look angry."

Ella didn't hesitate, but urged Mirage through a break in the crowd. She glanced back to see Raedwald glaring as he pursued her through the throng.

Where could she go? The camp was thick with men, the city thick with crowds. She turned toward the river, found a wide-open stretch of floodplain, and Mirage (who'd hardly had any exercise all day) took off at a gallop toward the tree-lined field where they'd practiced vaulting all week.

When Ella looked back, she saw, to her relief, that Raedwald and his men had turned around. Most likely they'd decided to take up their argument with the officials or the council. Ella took an indirect route back to camp, and hurried to her tent, where she changed out of her armor and into the clothing she'd worn on her trip to the dress shop her first day in Paris, bringing with her the skirt so she could transform into her female persona before entering the shop.

Neither Sigismund nor Jerome nor Henry were anywhere to be seen, which was probably for the best, since she didn't know what she'd say if any of them offered to go with her to pick up her clothes for the masquerade.

The sun would be setting within the hour, and the ball was scheduled to begin around sundown. Ella needed to get her dress, but she also wanted to bathe, if she could find a way to do so privately. Next to the dress shop she'd noticed a public bathhouse. She wondered how busy it would be.

Since she knew on which side of the camp Raedwald's

tents were pitched, Ella took a route that would lead her as far from that area as possible. It cost her a bit of time, and she stopped more than once to look behind her, but she didn't see any sign of her enemies or her friends.

The sun was sinking fast. Already the western sky was streaked with pinks and yellows, and the shadows were deepening. The further Ella traveled into the city, the darker the streets became, with tall buildings blocking out what little light was left from the sun.

This made navigating a bit tricky. Ella wasn't familiar with Paris in the first place. Other than remembering that it was on a wide-open square, she wasn't sure where to find the dress shop where she'd rented her ensemble.

Up ahead, she heard a commotion, and spotted a wide-open square. She hurried forward, knowing that the day was already growing late.

Thus it was that she rushed headlong into a boisterous crowd from the camp.

And it was not just anyone. Raedwald stood at the center of the commotion, complaining loudly about Allard's open abuses during the mounted melee.

The instant Ella recognized him, she stopped cold, and tried to step backward, hoping to disappear into the crowd. But it was too late. Raedwald had already recognized her.

He leapt forward, growling with an inhuman throaty eruption like a snarling wolf.

"There he is, the cheating boy who stole my horse!"

Ella tried to run, but strong hands plucked her up by the arms and lifted her so that her feet no longer touched the ground.

I flew above her, helpless to know what to do.

Raedwald stomped forward, seething, and punched her in the stomach. He started to yell something about the cheater getting what he deserved, or some such nonsense. I'll never know, because Ella, being held firmly by both arms, did the only thing she could do.

She used her legs, lifting the left in a sudden front kick that

landed firmly in Raedwald's midsection. She kept that foot planted against his belly and propelled her right foot higher, whipping two swift successive arched kicks against his head before he roared backward, beyond her reach.

Ella still hadn't caught her breath from being punched, or she might have yelled something at him in return.

Raedwald gathered himself and stomped forward.

This time, when Ella kicked, he jumped backward before her feet made contact with him.

The crowd, of course, was not watching silently. They were cheering and jeering and giving advice. Someone yelled, "Put him in the stocks!"

The suggestion gathered momentum, and a good portion of the crowd began to chant the same.

Perhaps it was the way his head still rang from Ella's kick, or the fast-approaching start of the ball, or perhaps he was really a coward at heart, but Raedwald yelled "Put him in the stocks!" and the crowd cheered again.

The men who held Ella's arms dragged her toward a pair of stocks, shoved her head and hands into the holes, and clamped it closed.

There was a moment's scrambling for a lock and key, but a padlock was produced from somewhere and a key turned.

My biggest fear this entire time was that someone would pull off Ella's cap and free her hair, or by some similar accident realize she wasn't a man at all. But it was just then that a herald rode through the square calling everyone to come to the ball, and the crowd followed him.

Raedwald was one of the last to leave. He sneered at Ella. "Stay there and rot tonight. I'll be back to beat you bloody in the morning. I don't want to get my suit messy tonight." He smoothed down his vest (which was black, embroidered with gold thread), and stalked away.

Scuppernong shenanigans! I flew in a tizzy in front of Ella's face, unsure what I could possibly do.

Once she was sure everyone was gone, Ella whispered to me. "Fairy godmother? Can you find Henry or Jerome or even

Sigi? Someone who can pick this lock for me? I can't reach it."

I was about to fly off when she added, "Oh, and find the dress shop for me!"

Much as I hated to leave her there, I hadn't offered her any protection when I was with her, so I doubted I'd be much use if I stayed.

I could not find Henry or Jerome or Sigi, and it occurred to me that, even if I did, I didn't know how I'd get them to come to Ella's aid. Would I grow to human size and pretend to be a concerned bystander who just happened to know they would be on Ella's side?

It didn't matter. I found the dress shop the next square over, and I flew back to Ella.

By the time I reached her the sun had set. It was dark, the square was empty, and Ella was crying.

"Cheer up, Child! I found the dress shop."

"Were they still open?" She sniffled through her tears.

"Yes, of course. They told you they'd be open all night for the ball, for late pick-ups and alterations and after-dance returns. And the bathhouse is still open, too!" I could see she'd rubbed her wrist nearly raw straining for the padlock, and to no avail.

"Did you get help?" Ella asked.

"No, but I had an idea." With that, I shrunk small—but not too small. About the size of the head of the key they'd used to lock the padlock. I flew in the keyhole and pushed with all my fairy might against the tumbler inside.

Cosmonauts and cliffhangers! It did not want to budge. I braced myself against the internal mechanisms and heaved all the harder, pushing even with my wings in my attempt to force it to move.

It scraped against the metal lodging and then, with a loud pop and a springing-motion that flung me airborne, the lock opened.

Ella rattled the stocks until the open padlock fell free of the metal loop that kept the heavy beam lodged hard against her neck and hands. She lifted the beam up. She was free.

"Which way to the dress shop?" She asked, unloosing her hair as she ran after me.

I flew ahead of her down the street to the square, where the shopkeepers were not busy at that moment, and had in fact taken advantage of the momentary lull to eat a snack to get them through the night. Ella entered with a jingle of doorbells, and sighed with relief at having arrived. "I've rented a gown."

There was just one woman behind the main counter at that moment, and she had her back to the door as she snacked on her supper. "The dark blue gown?" The woman asked, turning to face her.

"Yes. Trimmed in silver." Ella was still in her pants, but there was a display of petticoats between her and the counter, so the woman didn't even notice. "I've had some trouble this evening—I meant to be here two hours ago."

"Right this way. I'll fetch it—we put it in back."

By the time the woman returned with her ensemble, Ella had slipped into her skirt and looked, if rather disheveled, at least female.

Ella thanked the woman and paid her the final deposit plus the rent for the dress (she'd get her deposit back upon the safe return of everything later), and inquired about the bathhouse next door.

"Yes, they'll be open all evening. Expecting a rush again later after the ball. They're not busy now, though. You can dress over there once you've bathed."

So Ella did. It was an expensive bathhouse, more like a spa, really, but Ella didn't have time to be frugal. She bathed quickly and braided her hair up, twisting it around her head like a crown. It was smooth from her bath and the scented oils in the water, and by the time she dried off and dressed and put on her jewelry, no one would have cared much what her hair looked like.

She was a vision.

I'd gone outside (bathhouses are a bit steamy for fairies—the humidity is heavy on our wings) and found the quickest route to the palace, where the ball was already in full swing.

But it would be quite a hike up the hill, and Ella was in borrowed silver shoes.

I zipped back to camp and pulled loose the rope that held Mirage.

The horse knew me, of course, and followed quickly (I may have told her something about Ella being in trouble and needing her help). We arrived just as Ella was securing her mask in place over her eyes.

She stepped outside and saw Mirage waiting for her, then looked at me.

"It's quite a jaunt to the palace, and the ball is already underway. Now get going!"

Ella climbed on the mare's back and arranged her dress so it wouldn't rumple much. "I was wondering what I was going to do with my clothes." She held up the bundle of them she'd tied together. "I can leave them with Mirage in the stables, I guess."

She reached the fronts steps of the palace, and there were still guests arriving in carriages. Ella wasn't sure what to do with Mirage, but a valet came forward and offered to take her around to the stables, so Ella tied her bundle of clothes to the mare's reins, handed her over, and climbed the steps, alone, to the ballroom.

There were over a hundred steps. They were shallow steps, but there were still over a hundred of them, and I could see Ella's uncertainty as she climbed.

She'd never been to a ball before. She wasn't even used to being a girl. What if she spoke in a deep voice by accident? What if someone recognized her?

Honestly, there was little chance of that. Her chain mail usually covered her chin, which was the only part of her face now showing, besides her eyes and mouth and nostrils. She looked like a vision—perhaps a tad rumpled from the ride, and her hair less elaborate than that of many other girls, but still, there was no one more lovely.

She reached the top of the steps and there were people everywhere—dancing couples spinning in the middle of the

ballroom, more couples dancing on the veranda, and all around the sides of the ballroom, tables with food and drinks free for enjoying.

Ella saw these and realized she was famished. She made her way to a table overflowing with fresh fruit, and she selected several apple slices. She'd only eaten three when she felt eyes upon her, and turned to see Henry.

Chapter Seventeen

He was looking at her, and smiled when their eyes met.

She recognized him immediately, of course, never mind that he wore a mask, and had shaved off every trace of the tawny scruff that usually covered his chin. He stood like Henry and was built like Henry, and had Henry's sandy brown hair, and Henry's mouth and teeth and eyes. No little mask covering his forehead and cheekbones could change who he was.

When she smiled at him, he grinned back, and then began walking toward her.

Ella's heart did a panicked little dance inside her. What was she supposed to say? She'd have to keep her voice high—higher than she usually kept it, at least.

Henry picked up an apple slice and bit into it, still looking at her. He didn't seem to know what to say, either, but finally went with, "Did you just arrive?"

"Moments ago, yes," Ella said lightly—her voice not so high that it would sound unnatural, but not at all low, either. "And you?"

"I've been here an hour. Are you hungry?"

"Famished."

"There's roast turkey this way, and croissants." Henry led her away to a table and helped her find food and drink.

Ella ate delicately, taking tiny bites, using the very best manners just as Madame De Bouchard had always insisted, in great contrast to the informal masculine way she ate when she was dressed as Allard.

She ate until she thought it would be imprudent to eat any more. There was a fast dance going then, one of those stately group numbers with couples constantly changing partners, always dipping in and out of lines like shuttles on a weaving loom.

Ella watched the dancers and smiled. She'd practiced the very same dance many times at Madame De Bouchard's.

Henry noticed her smile and followed her gaze. "Do you dance?"

"I do. Do you?"

"Sometimes." He chuckled. "I don't always enjoy it, but tonight, I might. Would you like to join me?"

"I'd love to."

The current song was just ending, and some couples left the floor in search of refreshments, and others took places on the dance floor. Ella stood opposite Henry.

The music began, first the delicate quiver of strings, followed by the reverberating notes of the horned instruments, which sent a shiver of anticipation racing through Ella.

She was dancing at a real masquerade! And opposite Henry!

Just as the first downward beat hit, signaling the start of the dance, another man took a spot in a gap in the line.

Raedwald.

Ella stepped forward in time with the music, touching Henry's hand, dipping, prancing, turning, touching hands with the next dancer, and the next.

Raedwald made eyes at her as she reached him, hand poised in mid-air.

It took all her focus not to recoil as his fingers brushed hers. This was the man who'd punched her in the stomach earlier, who'd threatened to beat her bloody in the morning. In his mask, he looked as charming as anyone, and more handsome than most. He was tall—taller even than Henry, which made sense, since he was older than his cousin, who was only just eighteen, and therefore likely not done growing.

Raedwald had a square jaw that was shown off to great effect by the black mask he wore, and many of the other ladies smiled and batted their eyelashes when he touched their hands. His hair was pale blond, far paler than Ella's, and of such a distinctive color, it only stood to reason that many of those in attendance recognized him for who he was.

Perhaps it was because Ella didn't bat her eyes or simper as the other ladies did. Maybe it was her poise, her dancing skill,

or the fact that she looked lovely in her dress. Quite possibly he'd noticed his cousin talking with her, and wanted to make the prince jealous. I wouldn't have thought he could have recognized her for who she was, not yet, not then, but for whatever reason, Raedwald took an interest in Ella.

And when the music stopped, the lines of dancers had shifted unevenly, and Ella stood opposite Raedwald instead of Henry.

"My lady." Raedwald reached for her hand.

Ella pulled away, hoping that if she slipped off quickly, he might think she hadn't heard him or noticed him.

But Raedwald was much too quick for her. He grabbed her by the wrist. Her rented bracelet bit into the skin rubbed raw by her time in the stocks (the bracelet hid the injuries from sight, but hurt terribly when pressed into her skin by Raedwald's surprisingly aggressive grip).

The music picked up again, this time a slower tune for couples dancing.

"Dance with me," Raedwald told her, a slight smile frozen to his lips, his eyes hard.

Ella glanced to Henry, but he was penned in by a flock of females.

Raedwald clapped his free hand to Ella's waist, and spun her in a half-circle in time to the music. As he did so, he slid his hand from her wrist to her palm.

The bracelet raked her injured skin, but Ella refused to flinch. What if he saw her injured wrists? Would he guess what had scraped them, and make the connection to who she really was?

She couldn't take that risk.

So she danced.

To her credit, she kept her poise and held her head high. Not even Madame De Bouchard would have been able to find fault with her performance. And for all his lack of civility elsewhere, Raedwald danced exquisitely. He tended to be heavy-footed and forceful—at least, that was how Ella experienced him—but to anyone watching, they danced like a

perfect pair.

Henry didn't take his eyes off them. Oh, he danced with one of the girls from the flock that had encircled him, but he wouldn't have been able to tell anyone later what color her eyes were, because he never looked at them. He looked at Ella, dancing with Raedwald.

Of course he recognized his cousin, and he knew that the masquerade was not an appropriate place for a confrontation. But at the same time, he wanted to pull Ella away from Raedwald and run off with her to a place where Raedwald would never find them.

That wasn't an option, though, so he danced over to the band, excused himself from his dance partner, and requested a change of song.

Moments later, the group dance began again.

Raedwald let go of Ella, who ducked away on the excuse that she needed a drink. Raedwald might well have followed her, but Henry had collected his flock of females again, and stood directly in his cousin's path, forming the dance line to include Raedwald.

And then, once the dance was going and Raedwald was caught up in the steps, Henry slipped away to meet Ella.

"I'm headed to the garden for fresh air. Care to join me?" he asked her.

Ella took his arm, and they slipped through the crowd toward the wide paned doors that led to the fountained gardens. Climbing roses curved over archways and covered trellises high above their heads. Between the blooms, the light from the moon poured down. Columns at even intervals were capped with torches, illuminating the gardens with yellow light.

"I wanted to dance with you," Henry confessed. "But I couldn't reach you in time."

"I would have preferred to dance with you," Ella admitted. "That man was…so forceful."

"You didn't care for him?"

"Not at all."

Henry watched her carefully as she spoke, and finally

shook his head. "It's a masquerade, I know. We're not supposed to recognize anyone, but I feel as though I know you. I just can't place where or how. Please, could you tell me your name?"

It had occurred to Ella ahead of time that someone might ask her name. She'd also thought through the fact that her real name—Ella—sounded far too much like Allard. In truth, that was why she'd originally chosen it for her alias—because it sounded so like her name, she'd turn at the sound of it and answer to it without hesitation.

But for that same reason, she couldn't give her name as Ella now. It was too much like Allard, and that similarity alone might be enough to spark recognition.

She'd recognized both Henry and Raedwald easily. The only reason they didn't recognize her was because they knew Allard as a man. But the sound of her own name, coming from her own lips, would be too close to the truth for her to remain unknown.

So she knew she'd need a name that sounded different. At the same time, though, it needed to be a name she'd recognize as her own, one she would turn at the sound of, and answer to. So she gave the only other name she had, the pet name her father had given her.

"Cinderella."

"Cinderella," Henry repeated slowly, mulling the sound of it, searching his memory for any clues to their shared history. Clearly he didn't recognize it, though, because he asked, "Where do you hail from, Cinderella?"

"Charmont."

"Charmont!" Henry grinned, excited but even more perplexed. "That is my home city as well. Surely I know you. Who are your parents?"

Ella shook her head. She couldn't tell him anything more, not without giving away her true identity, and there was far too much on the line for her to risk doing that. "This is a masquerade. We are not supposed to know anything about one another. Besides, it wouldn't be fair for me to tell you

everything about myself. You have not even given me your name."

"It's Hugo."

"Hugo of Charmont?" Ella asked, looking innocent, though she knew his alter ego was supposed to be Hugo of Adalaard.

Henry looked slightly sheepish. "I suppose we should dance."

"I would like that."

So Henry led her back to the ballroom. Raedwald had by that time sulked off to another room, where he and his friends would drink and complain about Henry and Allard and the state of politics and tournament rules and everything else that didn't suit them.

But while they were grumbling, Henry and Ella danced.

Unlike Raedwald, Ella found Henry to be confident but not overbearing. He didn't as much lead her across the floor as he glided with her. They moved in time with the music with such perfect grace, they looked almost like trees bending in the breeze, or birds, soaring and swooping in the sky.

They danced three songs in a row, until the band changed the music back to a group number, and Henry led Ella back to the refreshment table.

"I can't recall when I've taken such pleasure in dancing," Henry told her, grinning as he said it.

"Nor I," Ella informed him.

"You must tell me more about yourself," Henry insisted. "I should like to be able to find you again after tonight."

Ella had considered that he might ask for more information, especially after his previous questions, and had used their time dancing to think of an answer she might give him that would not reveal too much.

It had also occurred to her that it might be useful to give him some clue to who she really was, even if she didn't want to make it so obvious that he could figure out her identity that very night. Her future was uncertain, but she knew she would cherish Henry's friendship forever.

So she answered somewhat cryptically. "My father is a

merchant from Charmont." This much was true, technically, so she didn't feel bad about saying it. "We're in Paris for the tournament, and of course, the dance."

"What brings a merchant to a tournament?" Henry pressed.

Here, Ella altered the truth. "I've a relative who competes—he's done quite well today especially, although I fear he's a controversial figure. I had no idea he was so skilled."

"Who is your relative?"

"He's a cousin of mine." Ella said, fighting to keep her composure. Her heart throbbed inside her with such intensity, she feared it might give her away.

"What's his name? Perhaps I know him."

Ella let her voice float high, far higher than usual, and prayed the words would not sound as they did all the other times she'd ever introduced herself. "Allard of Caprese."

Henry's mouth fell open, and he staggered half a step backward. "Allard!" He repeated, thankfully not too loudly. "I do know him. And, I daresay, I can see the resemblance. Yes, I see it quite clearly now. No wonder you seem familiar to me—you share somewhat of his eyes. And teeth." Henry looked at her, blinking.

Ella realized if he looked much closer, he might declare them to be surely more than cousins. "There, now you know far more about me than I ought to have told. I hear the band starting a new song. Shall we dance?"

They did. They danced until the ball was nearly through. Ella had begun to puzzle how she might get away, since Mirage was in the stables as doubtless Bastian was as well, and she didn't suppose she could claim that her cousin had lent her his horse for the evening. That wouldn't make sense at all.

But there was a room set up with chamber pots behind screens for the ladies, and Ella made the excuse of needing to visit that room, then slipped away through another door to the stables, having told Henry she'd meet him near the food shortly.

She rode swiftly into town, and between us, we were able

to find the dress shop again without too much trouble (it helped that it was one of very few shops still lit up at that hour, and I flew high above the buildings to spot it). There she changed from her gown into her plain dress, and got refunded her deposit.

She stopped again in an empty alley to put her hair up under her cap, and switch from a skirt to pants.

Only once she looked like Allard again did she ride into camp and find her tent.

Sigismund had returned earlier and was fast asleep.

Ella closed her curtain and lay back on her pallet, her heart still racing from the excitement of the evening. It occurred to her that Henry might question her about Cinderella, the cousin she'd never before mentioned, so she tried to think of what she might tell him.

She was still puzzling the question when her exhaustion overtook even her excitement, and she fell hard asleep.

"Allard!" Henry shook her arm, and she sat up with a jolt.

It was quite dark in the tent. "What? What is it?"

He'd never awakened her before—never stepped past the curtain when she had it closed.

"Are you alive, Allard? Are you hurt badly? Do I need to take you to the medical tent?" Henry spoke quickly. He was panting, and sounded shaken.

"I'm alive. Not hurt badly." She was completely disoriented, having been jerked out of a sound sleep, and couldn't think what Henry was talking about. "What's this about?"

"Was he lying, then? Richard said he put you in the stocks."

Ella noticed that Henry didn't bother with his cousin's pseudonym. Well, they were quite alone, and he was upset, so she supposed it didn't matter. "He did put me in the stocks. He wasn't lying about that."

"And he said he punched you silly while a group of other men held you, and he was coming back to beat you to a bloody pulp in the morning."

"Yes, all of that happened, save for the bloody pulp bit. I didn't care to wait around for that."

Henry exhaled with loud relief and sat next to Ella on the pallet. "I rode all through town and checked every square, all the stocks. I was afraid of what I might find. How did you get out?"

"I tried to work myself free—my wrists are a mess, you'll see that in the morning. But finally a little old lady came along and popped the lock and set me free."

"Oh, you're a lucky one. She'd face a fine if they ever found her."

"I don't think she approved of what they'd done to me."

"So, he did beat you."

"He tried. You know me. I gave it to him just as well. You didn't see his head, did you?"

"He was wearing a mask, like everyone else."

"He'll have a bruise near his right eye." Ella was fully awake now. "But how did you even learn all this? Is he going around boasting of what he did?"

"I was looking for someone else," Henry admitted. "He'd danced with her earlier and I thought when I saw him, maybe she'd be nearby, or he'd know where to find her. I never got to ask, though. He saw me and told me exactly what he'd done. He hates you, you know. He'd kill you if he thought he could get away with it."

Ella knew the threat was real, but she laughed to chase the fear away. "He couldn't get away with it. The crowds like me—you know that. Not all of them of course, but I'm very entertaining, and that means so much to them. If he tried to hurt me, he'd lose esteem in their sight. He can't afford to lose that."

"He's losing esteem already. I think that's why he talks of taking to the eastern circuit."

"Is he going to do that, do you suppose?"

"It would be a relief to me if he did, which may be the only reason why he hasn't done it yet." Henry shook his head. "But look, what are we doing sitting here? We've got to get packed

and going."

"Going? What time is it?"

"It's the middle of the night. Might be dawn in two or three hours, but we don't dare wait for sun's light."

"What do you mean?" Ella asked, as bewildered as she'd been when he'd first awakened her.

"Don't be dense, Allard. Richard intends to beat you to a bloody pulp in the morning. He's told all his friends, and he won't disappoint them. Do you think slipping the stocks is going to stop him? He'll only be more furious. He knows where our tent is pitched. I wouldn't be surprised if he showed up here any minute."

Ella leapt to her feet. The only threat worse than being beaten was the knowledge that, if she survived it, Henry would haul her off to the medical tent, and then all her secrets would be uncovered. "Why didn't I think of that? Yes, let's pack and go!"

Chapter Eighteen

They tore down the tent by torchlight. Henry insisted they put on their armor, since Raedwald could arrive at any moment. Ella didn't argue with him.

Jerome had returned earlier. They awakened him and he helped them. None of them could bring themselves to awaken Sigismund, who was in a sausage-induced stupor, so they loaded him on his pallet into the back of the cart, atop their other belongings, and sneaked away just as the light of dawn colored the sky.

"If we're lucky," Henry predicted, "Raedwald won't go looking for you until later in the morning. If he tries to run after us too soon, he could very easily catch up to us." He used the name Raedwald instead of Richard, because the route to the next tournament took them through town, and though most people were still asleep, anyone might overhear them at any time.

Jerome assured them, "If Raedwald comes after you, run on ahead. I'll keep track of the cart and meet you in Reims ahead of next week's tournament."

But Henry frowned. "I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that. If they can't catch Allard, they might take out their anger on you and Sigi."

Jerome made a whimpering noise. "Then what are we going to do?"

"Stay ahead of them. I do think Raedwald will head for the eastern circuit, and they're not going to waste a week looking for us," Henry guessed.

Ella hoped he was right, but she had hoped for many things in her life, and knew that the best way to see a hope fulfilled, was to make practical plans toward it.

And she wasn't nearly prepared to risk Sigismund and Jerome's safety on a hope.

Certainly not when Raedwald was involved.

"If they catch up to us," she determined, "I should part ways with you."

"Whatever do you mean?" Henry asked, sounding alarmed.

"He's upset with me," Ella clarified.

"He was upset with me first."

"Yes, but never so much as he is with me, and he knows he dare not hurt you. If I leave, he'll feel victorious about running me off. It will appease his anger a bit, and save Jerome and Sigi from getting caught up in his anger."

"What do you mean, *leave*?" Henry pressed.

"I mean I'll go home and take time away from the tournament circuit, either until he goes east or his anger blows over, or he finds someone else to hate—someone unaffiliated with you."

Jerome offered his opinion. "I think that's a fine idea."

"It's a terrible idea," Henry corrected, using his most authoritative voice. "And it won't come to that. Raedwald's going to go east and we're going to stay together. End of story."

Ella didn't challenge Henry further. She wanted to doze on her horse, but their pace was a bit brisk for that (they were still riding through town, and the cobbled roads there allowed the cart to roll much more swiftly than it could on the rutted dirt roads of the countryside, and Henry insisted they take advantage of the opportunity for speed).

Henry rode beside her, and he was eager to talk. "Allard, you never told me you had a cousin."

"I have a cousin," Ella echoed, yawning and hoping that Henry would take the hint and let her doze. "How did you learn of her?"

"I met her at the dance last evening."

"I thought it was a masquerade. How did you learn of her identity?"

"The two of us shared an immediate connection." Henry sounded awestruck still. "I looked at her and she smiled at me, and it was as though everyone else in the room disappeared."

"My cousin?" Ella didn't have to fake the surprise in her

voice. What she did have to hide was her rising heartrate. She'd never heard Henry speak of any girl this way.

"Yes, your cousin, Cinderella. You should have introduced her to me."

"I didn't think you cared to be introduced to girls."

"Usually I don't. Nor do I commonly care for dances, yet I enjoyed my time there more than I ever could have imagined. The girl is a delight. I feel almost as though I already know her, and she understands me. I've never experienced that before." Henry spoke with conviction. "I need to see her again."

Ella stayed silent, berating herself for creating such a mess, while at the same time, trying to think how she might pull off an introduction.

As she was mulling this, she heard the pound of hoof beats over the sound of their horses and cart.

"There they are! This way!" A masculine voice shouted.

Ella glanced back to more than half a dozen men on horseback, Raedwald and the Ulster brothers among them.

She pulled her chain mail over her chin and looked at Henry, ready to shout goodbye and flee.

But he had recognized the men as well. "Stay and fight," he ordered her. "We can take them."

"They outnumber us—vastly," Ella informed him.

Jerome tossed them both their lances from the cart. Ella wore her sword at her side, and pulled it free of the scabbard.

"I've seen you win against more," Henry reminded her, turning Bastian around to face those who approached.

"Only in a fair fight."

Henry ignored her, and addressed Jerome. "Take the cart—get Sigi out of here. I'll catch up to you on the road to Reims."

Jerome nodded and took off, encouraging the cart horse to a faster speed.

The men were bearing down on them rapidly. Ella turned her horse to face them and got her lance into position.

Bastian broke into a gallop. Ella reluctantly let Mirage have her head, and the mare raced forward, quickly closing the gap between the oncoming rush of men (Ella counted a total of

nine on horseback, plus a few more on foot behind them, though these were more likely to be interested in watching what proceeded, than participating in it).

Ella unhorsed the first man to reach her—the one who'd spotted them first and called to the others to give chase. The blow pulled her lance to the side, leaving her open as Raedwald bore down on her, his lance trained at her chest.

She had no time to move her weapon or defend herself, so she ducked backward, lying nearly flat on Mirage's back as the lance skipped by just above her head.

With a thunder of hooves, several horses raced past her.

Ella sat up. She was tempted to try to flee, but four men on horseback had created a blockade across the street, so she'd have to go through them to escape.

Behind her, the remaining horsemen did the same.

The only good news was that none of them went after Jerome and Sigi.

That was small encouragement, considering that the horsemen glared at Ella with murderous intent.

"Ha!" Henry goaded Bastian forward. He didn't have near enough momentum (or room to create momentum) to knock any of the men off their horses with his lance, so he engaged the nearest man with his sword.

Realizing they'd have to fight their way through, Ella surged forward, ready to lock swords with the nearest man in front of her.

She heard hoof beats behind her an instant before a lance clapped across her back, sweeping her sideways in the saddle.

She gripped her horse with all the strength in her legs and tried to right herself, though the blow had knocked the air from her lungs and sent spears of pain shooting through her body.

A second blow hit her in the leg, half-lifting her from her horse as it peeled her free of her saddle.

Ella had just enough presence of mind to land on one foot, bringing her other leg around and staggering forward, rather than landing on her back on the cobblestones.

The men were upon her in an instant, grabbing her by the

arms and legs this time, holding her off the ground and turning her around to face Raedwald as he approached.

She'd never seen Raedwald looking so pleased, and yet livid with fury at the same time. It was a similar look to the bloodthirsty expression he'd worn the very first time she'd saved Henry from his sword.

But Henry could not save her as she had saved him. He'd been unhorsed as well, and three men held him back, though he struggled to break free.

"Allard of Caprese," Raedwald snarled the name as he approached.

Ella braced herself. She couldn't kick—the men had hold of her legs this time (they'd obviously learned their lesson). She couldn't break away or even move, and anticipated a blow at any time.

But when Raedwald's hand snapped forward, it wasn't to punch her. Instead, he grabbed her leather helmet and snatched it from her head with a rattle of chain mail. He flung it aside.

Ella still wore her cap. She glanced over at Henry, who was still some distance away, but was being held so that he was forced to watch everything.

"Allard," Raedwald repeated, extending his hand a second time. His fingers wrapped around Ella's cap and yanked it from her head.

Her braid was still pinned high in the same updo she'd worn to the ball the night before, but as Raedwald pulled off her cap, the tail of her braid came free.

"Is a girl!" Raedwald declared victoriously.

Some of the men laughed, but most of them were too stunned to make a sound. Here was the man who'd defeated them in battle, who'd bested Raedwald and even unhorsed him.

And he was a girl.

A very pretty girl.

"And what," Raedwald continued haughtily, "do we do with girls?"

With as little noise as he could manage, Henry (who'd been holding completely still this entire time to lull his captors into

thinking he wasn't going to struggle, and had waited for a moment of distraction such as this) sprang forward, pulling his arms free with such a sudden jerk that the men failed to hold him. He leapt upon Mirage's back and bore down upon the men who held Ella.

Bastian, sensing his master's prompt, and not to be outdone by a mare, thundered forward as well.

The men were still half in shock to learn that their feared enemy was a girl, and I daresay there was enough sense of chivalry in some of them, they didn't feel quite so comfortable holding their prisoner for a beating now that they recognized her as the lady who'd danced so beautifully at the masquerade the night before.

Whatever it was, as much fear of being trampled as anything, I suppose, they either leapt out of the way or at least loosened their grip, and Henry got hold of Ella's arm just as they'd practiced so many dozens of times over their travels, and he hoisted her onto Mirage behind him.

They galloped away down the streets.

It took a few moments of scrambled surprise for Raedwald and his men to find their horses and mount them. They tried to ride after Henry and Ella, but Henry steered Mirage (with Bastian following) around sharp corners, through narrow streets, and down every bending byway, so that the path behind them was a trail as tangled as a knotted string.

Ella couldn't see for her tears.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she told him when she could finally find her voice.

"Sorry for what?" Henry slowed the horses once he was sure they were no longer being followed. He found an alleyway whose entrance was nearly hidden by vines, and ducked into the hiding place. There he dismounted, and pulled Ella down after him.

"I lied to you. I'm not a boy."

"I have suspected," Henry confessed, "ever since you tried to curtsy to me the day I first met you. At times I was nearly certain of the truth. But then, I thought, if you were a girl,

surely you'd tell me." His eyes searched her face.

Ella opened her mouth to speak, to explain to him why she'd never trusted him with the truth, but she had no explanation to give.

Henry continued. "I always tried to make you feel safe."

"You did," she acknowledged, seeing clearly now all the ways he'd protected her secret from everyone else.

"I've never come out and asked you straight, but I've tried to discuss subjects that might lead you to tell me, especially when you first joined me on the circuit, and again when I danced with your cousin last night. You are Cinderella, aren't you?"

"I am," Ella admitted through her tears.

"Can I find you at Caprese, as you said?"

"That is my home."

"Go there. Someday soon, when I can slip away and I'm sure I'm not being followed, I'll visit you there." Henry reached into his pockets and found every coin he carried, which didn't amount to a princely sum, but would at least be more than enough to buy food and lodging, even if she took a roundabout route home.

He pressed the coins into her hands.

Ella shook her head, but Henry insisted.

"Go now," he told her. "Ride hard. If they catch up to you, you'll have the fight of your life on your hands. I'll circle back around and try to make sure none of them follow you."

"Don't try to fight them alone!"

"I won't. If I can, I'll watch them without letting them see me, just enough to make sure they're not following you. Then I've got to catch up to Jerome and Sigismund. I don't know how long Sigi will be able to look after Jerome without me."

Ella laughed in spite of herself, knowing that eight-year-old Sigi was the more responsible of the two, and the much elder Jerome would likely be the first of the pair to get into trouble.

"Cinderella," Henry whispered, tucking back the loose bit of braid before cupping her cheek in his hand. "You are the most remarkable girl I've ever met. I owe you for my life. Still.

I'm forever in your debt."

He leaned closer.

It occurred to Ella that he might be about to kiss her.

She wasn't opposed to the idea.

But Mirage must have guessed his intentions, and did not approve. She nudged him away quite suddenly, then shook her mane, blowing out an impatient huff of air.

"That's right," Henry acknowledged. "You need to be on your way. Stay safe. I shall see you again."

Ella felt her throat choking up, and she didn't trust her voice, nor her sleep-deprived, over-emotional mind. The one thing she wanted to say more than anything was *I love you*, but she couldn't tell him that, not after she'd let him down and caused so much trouble, besides lying to him all that time about who she was.

She climbed into Mirage's saddle.

Henry peered through the leafy vines that covered the alleyway. "The way is clear. You go left, I'll go right," he instructed as he mounted Bastian. "Do you know your way home?"

Ella nodded, still not trusting herself to speak.

"Godspeed, Cinderella," Henry told her, and goaded Bastian away to the right.

Ella turned and went left, alert to every sound, afraid Raedwald or his men might catch up to her at any moment.

She fled Paris without incident, and made her way back in the direction of Caprese. She bought a new cap before she even left the city, and tucked all her hair out of sight, since it wasn't at all appropriate for a girl of her age to be traveling all alone across Europe.

She ate little, and slept on the hard ground many nights, inns being difficult to come by, and oftentimes overfilled with rowdy men and even fleas, making them no more pleasant than hayfields. Mostly she pondered her regrets, and wondered what she could have possibly done differently.

Going to the masquerade, which seemed to be her worst mistake (for surely it must have been there that Raedwald first

began to suspect her true identity) wasn't something she could bring herself to regret. It had been too lovely, and her memories of dancing with the prince were her greatest treasure.

Nor could she regret competing, though that was what had provoked Raedwald's ire. She'd made a good showing for herself, defended Henry, and had great fun, other than the times she'd been painfully injured. No, she didn't regret her tournament participation, nor any of the choices she'd made that had enabled her to participate.

In fact, as she pondered the problem on her long journey home, she came to the conclusion that her biggest mistake, and her greatest regret, had been lying to Henry about who she really was. Her mother had suggested he could be trusted.

If Henry's claim was correct, if he had indeed suspected her true identity since their very first meeting, then she could have trusted him with the truth, since he'd kept the secret so well, he'd never even demanded to know the truth for himself.

Looking back, she realized that was why she'd been able to keep her secret for so long. Henry had protected her privacy and made it possible for her to dress and bathe and sleep without ever being seen.

And in all that time, in spite of his unwavering assistance, she'd never even considered telling him she wasn't who she pretended to be.

Ella grieved her choice the entire way home.

The journey was long and lonely. As she drew closer to Caprese, Ella longed for nothing more than to embrace her mother and confess all that had happened, including her realization—too-late, that she should have taken Nora's advice from the beginning, and entrusted Henry with her secret.

No doubt her mother, as always, would console her, and comfort her with words of encouragement. Perhaps she'd even have advice for Ella, an idea for how she could make things right with Henry once again.

She'd lost so much in that one awful morning—her identity as Allard, her opportunity to travel the tournament circuit and compete as a man, and the companionship of her friends. In

spite of Henry's calm assurances at their parting, she couldn't imagine that he would hold only fond memories of her. She'd lied to him. Surely, once he'd had time to reflect on all that had passed between them, he would resent her for not trusting him with the truth.

She resented herself for the same.

So as she topped the first high hill that offered a view of Caprese, Ella's heart, which had been downcast those many days as she traveled home, now rose with hope.

She was home. Her mother would embrace her and make her favorite foods, and would listen to all Ella's adventures. It was something to look forward to, and Ella nudged Mirage forward in anticipation.

But it was not meant to be.

Chapter Nineteen

The closer they came to Caprese, the faster Mirage trotted. Ella didn't have to nudge her. The mare recognized home, and hastened forward with a sense of urgency.

As they drew closer, Ella's heartbeat sped up as well. She told herself she was simply eager to be home, and excited to see her mother, but there was something about the house that wasn't right, some spirit of melancholy that seemed to hover over it, as though the light had left that place.

Indeed, as she neared the house, Ella could see that the curtains were drawn over the windows, though it was mid-day and the weather was fair, and her mother had always insisted on opening the curtains first thing every morning, and letting in as much light as she possibly could.

Mirage stopped at the fountain near the front door and lowered her head to drink, so Ella dismounted and approached the house.

When she'd thought about her homecoming over the last few days, she'd imagined herself running to the door, or her mother running out to meet her.

But the house was silent and dark, unfamiliar in a shadowy way, and Ella felt pensive as she approached. The flower beds were overrun with weeds, the vines crept over the windows, and even the fountain was blackened by an unusual growth of scum.

Ella pulled her cap from her head, freeing the braid that was in dire need of washing, and looked down at the worn and stained leather armor she still wore.

It wasn't much of a traveling dress, but her mother wouldn't care.

The front door creaked as she opened it, which was odd, because her mother always insisted on keeping everything well maintained. The sound reminded her of the doors at Madame De Bouchard's, at least until she had taken it upon herself to oil

them.

"Hello?" Ella called as she stepped into the foyer, which was more than just surprisingly dark. It was gloomy, and the smells were all wrong. Gone were the scents of fresh air and the bouquets of fresh flowers her mother left in every room.

The house smelled musty, the lingering scent a distinct perfume Ella knew all too well.

"Mother? I'm home!" Ella had to struggled to keep her voice hopeful.

Footsteps echoed from the direction of her mother's room, and a voice carried down the hall. "Ella? Is that you?"

But it was not her mother's voice.

It was Madame De Bouchard's.

"Madame?" Ella asked as the woman stepped into sight.

"Ella?" Madame recoiled visibly when she spotted Ella. "Whatever are you wearing, Child? Are those…pants?" She nearly choked on the final word.

"Yes. Where's my mother? Why—"

"She's dead. Dead of a fever."

"What? No," Ella knew the cruel woman too well to believe her. Surely it was a lie. "What are you doing here?"

"Your mother is dead and your father, in his wisdom, and concerned for the proper upbringing of you, his only daughter, has married me."

Ella staggered backward and gripped the door handle. Surely Madame was lying.

More footsteps echoed from upstairs. "Mother, who are you talking to? Who's here?"

Agatha and Bertha flounced to the stairs and slowly began their descent, jabbering inanely the entire way.

"Is that a man?"

"He doesn't look like a man."

"He's dressed like a man."

"But look at his hair. Do you know who it looks like?"

Both girls gasped at once.

"Ella?" Bertha questioned, before erupting in peals of laughter.

"No, it can't be." Agatha hurried down the last few steps, and peered at Ella in the dark foyer. "Oh, it is! It's Ella. She's wearing pants." Agatha joined her sister in fits of giggles. "How absurd!"

"Girls!" Madame rebuked them. "Manners! Your sister has returned from her journey. Show her to her room—to her *new* room."

Ella had no idea what Madame was referring to. Obviously there had been some horrible mistake, or Madame was playing a particularly sinister joke (she didn't have much of a sense of humor, but she was occasionally amused by certain sadistic things, and so joking about death, macabre as it might be, was within the realm of possibility, and certainly preferable to the possibility that what Madame had said was true).

Still, she knew enough of Madame to know that if the woman wanted her to follow Agatha and Bertha, she ought to do so quickly, or risk being struck.

So Ella followed the girls up the stairs in a daze of confusion. They passed the doorway to her room, and Ella saw it was filled with a mess of clothes and shoes (some of them unfamiliar, some of them hers) strewn everywhere about. Indeed, as she blinked at Agatha and Bertha, she realized they were each wearing garments that had been hanging in her wardrobe when she'd left to meet Henry at the tournament at Charmont so many months before.

The two girls led her down the hall to the attic stairs, where they simply opened the door, pointed, and said, "Up there."

Ella went, hoping to find her mother hard at work on a project, or possibly even tied up against her will.

But there was only a pile of her things, which had been in her room. She lifted one of her favorite books of maps from the pile, and noticed an extra bit of paper sticking up from inside.

It was a note in Bertie's handwriting.

Ella,

I rescued these from the burn pile. Those girls wanted to throw out everything. Sorry for the upheaval. I couldn't stop any of it. I fear Father, in his grief, has made a terrible mistake

marrying that woman, but he believes he's doing the right thing, and given our current financial straits, I don't know what other choice we have.

Father and I are hoping to make a profit this next journey, but our options are limited. News from the east has been suppressed, so I don't know if you've heard, but there are troubles both political and economic in the neighboring kingdoms. Saracen pirates rob merchants freely on land and at sea, and the governments of those kingdoms are doing nothing to stop them. They claim they are trying, but I have seen no proof, and there are rumors that they get a cut of all the spoil (this may be conjecture fueled by spite and anger, but the problem is pervasive, so it may be true). Not only does this make it impossible for us to bring our goods across the border (and thus turn a profit), but I fear for the safety of our kingdom.

I will tell you more when next I see you in person. Until then, stay strong. I'm sure Mother is watching over us, and we must do right by her memory.

Much love,

Bertie

Though his handwriting was clear and his words all recognizable, Ella had to read the note over several times to understand what her brother was saying. Part of this was because she couldn't believe her father would ever marry anyone after her mother, least of all that awful woman, Madame De Bouchard. But it was also because, by the end of her first time through reading it, tears welled up in her eyes, making it that much more difficult for her to understand the words.

It was like a riddle. Bertie's statements didn't fit with what she understood to be true of reality, so she had to rearrange all the certainties of her world until they formed a coherent picture.

It was not a picture she liked.

Was her mother really dead? It didn't seem possible. Her mother had always been strong and healthy and full of life. Ella

didn't want it to be true. She wanted to hug her mother—she'd wanted to for days and days, and now she'd never have that opportunity again.

But people died all the time, and anyway, what were Agatha and Bertha doing taking over her room? Her mother never would have allowed it, not if she could stop them.

So maybe she couldn't stop them.

Maybe she was dead.

And Madame taking over the house…clearly she hadn't just arrived for a visit. There were too many changes that would have taken days or even weeks to sink in. The house was beginning to get run down. That fit with Madame's way of doing things. And the darkness, and the smells—it all fit.

Just as Bertie had said, Ella couldn't imagine her father marrying Madame De Bouchard, but if his grief had overwhelmed him, and if he felt it was the right thing, and if their financial situation was dire—he'd do it just to save Caprese and the horses.

The horses!

Ella felt a jolt of fear as she recalled the poor conditions Madame De Bouchard's horses had been in when she'd first gone to serve as handmaid there. If her father and brother were both away on a trade journey, and if Madame and her daughters were the only ones around to care for them, no doubt her mother's beloved animals were being terribly neglected.

With haste, Ella stripped out of the heavy leather armor that she'd worn for so many days, and riffled through the pile of things her brother had rescued for her. Agatha and Bertha had left her only her most worn and unappealing clothes, but she pulled them on with little thought, glad for the increased freedom of movement the cool clothes provided, compared to the armor she'd grown so tired of.

Then she hurried downstairs and out of the front door.

Mirage had wandered away from the fountain and was eating from the bushy grasses that had grown up between the hydrangeas and the rose bushes. Ella took hold of her reins and used them as a lead rope to steer the horse around to the back

of the house, toward the barn.

The pasture closest to the barn was empty, and the barn doors were closed. Ella could see no sign of the horses anywhere. She nearly tripped over her own feet as she started to run toward the barn.

The door creaked heavily as she pulled it open and peered inside, thankful that the whoosh of stale air that greeted her did not contain the scent of death, or even the putrid smells such as she had encountered on her first day at Madame De Bouchard's.

The barn also did not contain any signs of life.

Where were the horses? Had Madame sold them off? Were they in such dire financial straits that her father and brother had taken them away to trade?

Panic coursed through her, burning her eyes and clouding her thoughts. Her mother was dead? She couldn't lose the horses, too.

Mirage had not been told that Nora was gone, nor was the horse aware that their home was under new ownership. The mare only understood that they were finally back home after a long absence, and that tasty grasses now grew among the formerly off-limits roses and hydrangeas.

Also, it is safe to guess that Mirage was as eager to see her family as Ella had been to see hers. The mare sniffed the air, tossed her head, and trotted around the small pasture toward the hayfield.

Ella ran after her.

Mirage whinnied, and the sound seemed to echo many times over from beyond the hill.

Before Ella even topped the hill, she saw horses trotting up to greet their sister. Ella nearly sobbed with relief at the sight of them, but didn't stop running until she'd reached the point where she could see all the horses.

Her father and brother's favorite mounts were missing—with them on their journey, no doubt. The two pairs that usually pulled their wagons were gone, as were a couple of others, but the rest of the herd was accounted for.

Mirage's mother, who'd run up to greet Mirage, now walked over to Ella and nosed her in the shoulder before nibbling lightly against her neck and ear.

Ella flung her arms around the horse's neck, and bawled.

She cried her heart out, and the horses gathered around her, nuzzling her with their velvet lips and stomping the ground with aching sympathy. Ella embraced them all in turn, picking off ticks from their unkempt coats, and apologizing to them that they hadn't had their manes or tails combed, or even been brushed down, in weeks and weeks.

The horses didn't seem to care about all that. They had the small stream at the bottom of the hayfield, and though there wouldn't be any hay to put up for some time thanks to their grazing, they'd not starved, in spite of their obvious neglect. Most likely they'd taken shelter in the woods, or simply stood in the rain when the weather had assaulted them.

But they didn't hold any of that against Ella. They were simply glad to see her, and she, them.

Ella cried until her body could no longer produce tears. By then her stomach was rumbling for want of food and her throat was parched. The horses had food and water to spare, and though they needed brushing down, the task was not urgent. Ella removed Mirage's saddle and gear and carried them back to the tack room in the barn.

She checked on the other animals, and found the dairy cow and goats behind the barn in the small rear hayfield. Both the cow and the goats had nursing young. Ella couldn't imagine Madame or her daughters milking either, and supposed she'd have to work with the animals to get them back into production.

The chicken coop was a mess with feathers everywhere, but no sign of any eggs or any chickens. No doubt the door had been left open, and a predator had made a feast of their flock. Ella would have to buy chicks from a neighbor, but if that was their only loss, it wasn't so bad.

The old dog seemed happy to see her, and Ella patted his head, but the cats fled when she tried to approach them, which

made her wonder, because they'd always been friendly before. Knowing what she did of Agatha and Bertha's attitude toward "filthy animals," they may well have been chased off repeatedly of late.

Ella shook her head. She had work to do.

She headed up to the back of the house, toward the door to the kitchen.

This time, when she entered, she wasn't expecting much. If anything, she was bracing herself for whatever mess she might encounter, so the kitchen almost made her laugh.

Every dish they owned was dirty, and many appeared to have been used multiple times over since their last washing. To Ella's knowledge, neither Madame nor her daughters knew the first thing about cooking nor lighting fires. Few of the pots and pans had been used at all, but the cheeses were all gone, and the regular garden stores had been greatly reduced.

As near as Ella could tell from the crumbs, Madame and her daughters had bought bread, probably in the village (Ella and her mother had always made their own, but the bread pans still hung untouched on their hook) and eaten it sliced with cheese.

There wasn't much to eat, but Ella fetched water from the cistern and was quenching her thirst when Madame appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"It's past six," Madame informed her briskly.

Ella's stomach stirred. What was the woman trying to say? When Ella had served as her handmaid, she'd served dinner promptly at six every evening, but surely the woman didn't expect—

"You've been home for hours!" Madame snapped. "What have you been doing? Where is our dinner?"

"There isn't any food," Ella pointed out. Even on the worst of days she'd normally have had eggs, but since the coop had been raided, she didn't even have that option.

"So I've noticed." Madame sneered. "This is a mean existence I've married into. I fully expect, now that you're home, that our standard of living will be lifted. We'll take our

dinner in the dining room as soon as you can prepare it. Don't make me wait!"

The woman turned and stalked away.

Ella was tempted to throw something after her, but that wouldn't accomplish anything. She doubted Madame and her daughters were really all that hungry, because there wasn't any bread anywhere, just crumbs, and the mice would have picked those off if they'd been sitting there for very long. No, undoubtedly they'd gobbled up the last of the bread, and were now demanding she cook for them as a matter of principle, because they expected her to always wait on them.

Now, you may be thinking that Ella shouldn't have had to take that kind of treatment from them, and indeed, you're right. The girl who defeated armed knights could have easily warded off a beating from Madame De Bouchard, but there was a great deal more going on than their battle of wills.

The De Bouchard name was one of some prominence, and Madame loved nothing more than to gossip. She could ruin the Caprese reputation if she chose to.

Ella couldn't risk that, not when their fortunes were already low.

Whatever grief-stricken madness had compelled her father to marry that mumpsimus morass, Ella had to believe he was trying to do the very best thing. If they needed Madame's name or her money to keep Caprese, then Ella wouldn't question her orders.

She'd make dinner, though there was no food.

Thankfully, Ella's mother had always kept a large garden. Ella went in search of food among the overgrown weeds. Though some of the vegetables were rotting away on their vines (neither Madame nor her daughters could apparently be bothered even to pick the food), Ella was able to find a cucumber and tomatoes and basil, which she carried to the house, sliced, and arranged on a plate.

There was no fresh cheese to layer between the slices, nor olive oil to pour over it, but Ella enjoyed the slices she nibbled (the ugly ones, of course—she couldn't serve them for fear of a

lecture), and at any rate, there was nothing else.

Agatha and Bertha turned up their noses at the food, but Madame ate with mincing bites and told her daughters to do the same.

Not that Ella stayed to watch. She dismissed herself and returned to the garden, where she ate a few more vegetables, pulled weeds, and in general wondered how she was ever going to survive until her father and brother returned.

She hoped they would not be gone long.

But even in that, she was disappointed.

Chapter Twenty

Ella became every bit the same handmaid she'd been at Madame De Bouchard's, which is to say she was essentially a servant. In some ways it wasn't so bad, because it was her own beloved Caprese she was taking care of, and her dear horses and woods and fields besides.

But in some ways it was so much worse, because every day she had to endure watching that woman lounge about in her mother's gowns (yes, she did), and Agatha and Bertha flounce around in her dresses, leaving buttered crumbs on her upholstery, and water rings on her furniture, and scuffing and scratching and in all other ways defacing and ruining the home she so loved.

Worst of all was the fact that she had to live each day in constant reminder of her mother, knowing the woman was gone and would never be coming back.

Her only hope was that her father and brother would have a successful trade journey and return much enriched. Perhaps, if they could afford it, she could convince her father to set aside Madame De Bouchard, and the woman would leave with her daughters never to return.

Her other hope, which was more of a secret hope, and one she cautioned her heart not to expect, was that Henry would arrive as he'd promised.

That hope was tempered by the very real likelihood that once he thought about it, he'd realize she'd purposely lied to him about who she was, and he'd resent her for it. Even if he never reached that conclusion (he had a generous heart, after all, which tended to see the best in people, which was probably why he kept Jerome on all that time in spite of his drunken singing and otherwise uselessness), there was every likelihood Henry would never make it to Caprese, and not because he didn't want to come.

He was a prince, after all, and as such, his time was not his

own. He was busy. He had other responsibilities besides proving his military prowess at the tournaments. No matter how good his intentions, he simply might never be able to set aside the time to sneak away and visit her without being followed.

So Ella made the best she could of what she had. She opened the curtains every morning and kept them open all day, no matter how often Madame De Bouchard complained about the light. Madame and her daughters were much too lazy to rise and shut the curtains every time Ella opened them, and when they told her to close them, she simply walked away.

Madame hated that, but the woman learned to pick her battles. She knew Ella was strong (just how strong, she had no idea), but Madame was smart enough not to fight her on something as trivial as curtains.

Between buying chickens with the money she had left over from the coins Henry had given her, to weeding the garden and setting by what stores she could for winter, to putting up hay (not enough to get them through the winter, but it was all they had, and if they could get by until her father returned, perhaps they could afford to buy more), Ella returned her home to some semblance of its former sufficiency. She got the cows and goats back up in their milk production, and made cheese and butter, which Madame and her daughters gobbled up.

There were few other foods for her to buy in town, or even in Charmont. Madame and her daughters had gone in search of silks for new dresses. They'd allowed Ella to accompany them to town only because their stores of spices had been exhausted, the shops in the local village were out, and since neither Madame nor her daughters knew the difference between cinnamon and nutmeg, or even what price those goods ought to cost, they wanted Ella to shop for spices.

But the prices had risen tenfold on every imported spice. Local herbs were not expensive—but Ella didn't need to buy those, because she grew them in the garden.

One of the shopkeepers recognized her and asked about her father. "When will he be back with spices? We've had nothing

new from anyone in over a year. I've contacted my colleagues in other cities, asking if they have anything to spare, but everyone else is out, too. I have people asking every day, and no answer to give them. What's going on?"

Ella could only tell him what little she knew from her brother's note. "Saracen pirates are blocking every route, by land or sea, and robbing everyone. No goods have made it through. It's not for lack of trying. My father and brother are long overdue home, and I fear for their safety."

The shopkeeper shook his head. "Pirate activity has been growing worse in recent years. I'd heard the governments of our neighboring kingdoms to the east were trying to resolve the issue."

"They may be working with them," Ella acknowledged, "but they obviously haven't resolved anything."

Ella left the shop. She didn't have anywhere else she needed to be, there was no hope of finding the spices she needed, and she was in no hurry to rejoin Madame and her daughters. Most especially, she didn't want to go into any shops where she'd be at risk of bumping into them again.

She turned instinctively and walked uphill toward the castle. She could see from the pennants flying on the turrets that Henry was not currently in residence, so she harbored no hope of bumping into him. Still, the castle was his childhood home, and she felt drawn to it just as strongly as if he were standing before her.

There was the small issue that she had no business at the castle, and of course the guards at the front gates interviewed any visitor before letting them proceed, and many were turned away.

Ella did not even bother to approach them. Instead she turned her attention to the legal shops and charterhouses that lined the road nearest the castle. She was not personally in need of any legal documents, but nonetheless she slowed her pace and peered in through the open shutters.

In the third shop, she was surprised to spot a face she recognized.

Jerome.

He wore a tunic with the shop's emblem, and stood behind the high main desk, dipping his pen and writing with care.

Ella's heart skipped frantically. Granted, by this time it had been some months since she'd left the tournament circuit, and Jerome had never been of much use beyond his basic skills as a herald, so she could understand Henry might have grown tired of him. He was, of course, highly literate, and would be employable in any profession that had need of such skills.

Was that it, then? Had Henry dismissed him, or had he transferred him to a position in the charter shop? How long had he been away from Henry? Would he have news of her friend?

Ella reached for the door handle, then paused. Should she enter? Would he recognize her? He and Sigi had fled away before Raedwald had unmasked her. She'd often wondered how far word of her true identity would spread. Henry, of course, wouldn't tell anyone. He'd have no reason to.

Would Raedwald or his men? They'd chased her off, which was what they'd wanted. They'd only embarrass themselves if they made claim that the man who'd bested them so many times at tournament was really a girl.

So it stood to reason Jerome would not know her as a girl.

She smoothed her dress and entered the shop.

Jerome looked up at the sound of the jingling bell. A glimmer of recognition flitted across his features, followed immediately by puzzlement.

He could not place her.

His voice faltered slightly (a rarity for him). "M-my lady? May I help you?"

"Jerome." Ella kept her voice high and light, as unlike the deep gruff voice of Allard as she could make it. "You were a herald for Hugo of Adalaard, were you not?"

"Yes." Jerome smiled at being recognized (a good sign then that he had not left on painful terms), but his puzzled expression grew. He could not place her. "Up until three weeks ago, when I finally transferred to a bed that doesn't move every week."

Ella tittered and batted her eyes, playing up her every feminine quality so Jerome would be less likely to recognize her.

Jerome blushed.

Great, now he thought she fancied him.

Well, why not? If he thought her a fan of him personally, he might tell her things he'd never disclose to a random inquisitor.

"I always thought you did a fine job as herald," she told him, pouting her lips in sympathy.

Jerome's blush grew, and he straightened, puffing his chest. "Thank you, my lady."

"It's a wonder your master could find anyone to replace a man of your skills. Or has he left the tournament circuit?"

"Oh, no, he still competes. He thought it would be good to take on a new man—there's been a great deal of upheaval in the tournament world of late. Raedwald of Nordheim left for the eastern circuit."

"Did he?" Ella fluttered her eyelashes over eyes wide with surprise. "Whatever for? I thought he dominated here."

"He did well, of course, but there was a new rule he didn't like. They're allowing those unhorsed in the mounted melee to continue in play if they can remount within a minute."

"Remount!" Ella tittered, a strange tinkling laugh that sounded foreign even to her own ears. "My, that is a change. But your master has stayed on in spite of it?" She wanted to learn everything she could of Henry. Her heart burned for information about him, but she knew she'd have to keep up her façade. The longer they talked, the greater the chance Jerome would recognize her.

"Oh, he was in favor of it. He was one of the men who pushed for the change, actually."

"And he's doing well? He hasn't been injured?"

"Oh, no injuries. Nothing serious, anyway. The occasional bruise, of course. But no, he's done quite well. Took second at sword a month ago. I've not heard much news since I left, though."

Ella wanted to ask if Allard had been replaced, but she didn't dare mention the name. She'd been over-daring already. In fact, there wasn't anything she could think to ask.

Jerome blinked at her, still clearly trying to sort out why she looked familiar. "Are you in need of any paperwork? Charters, legal papers…"

"Not today, thank you. I merely recognized you from the window and had to determine whether it was really you. I've always been a fan." She fluttered her eyes and turned toward the door.

"Thank you! Stop in again, any time!" Jerome called after her.

Ella stepped from the shop and caught her breath.

Henry was fine. He was doing well. He hadn't been injured, and Jerome seemed utterly oblivious to the possibility that Ella and Allard were the same person—which meant it was unlikely her unmasking had been the subject of discussion or even rumor, or he surely would have heard.

Ella walked back down the street in the direction of the dress shops. She'd had little, if any, good news of late. The fact that Henry was getting along well, and Raedwald not currently a threat to him, was the only encouragement she'd had in a string of stinging disappointments. She tucked that knowledge away in her heart to cheer her as the winter stretched on.

Madame and her daughters caught up to Ella shortly thereafter. They were sulking, unhappy to have found there was little selection in the shops, and nothing new.

"They've had nothing new from the east," Agatha pouted.

"Nothing new at all but wool from England," Bertha added, making a face to show what she thought of England's stuffy wool.

"None of the traders have been able to get through in the east," Ella explained to them. "The stores were all out of spices, as well."

This announcement sent Madame and her daughters into fits of complaint, not that any of their grumbling could change the reality of the situation.

They were upset because they wanted exotic flavors in their food. Ella noted that none of them expressed any distress over the issue that bothered her the most.

The exports weren't making it to Charmont because the traders weren't getting through.

Her brother and her father (who was technically Madame's husband, so she ought to have been concerned) were on trading journeys in the east. They should have returned before winter, but all the leaves were off the trees, and every morning dawned frostier than the last.

Something was keeping them, and all the merchants, from coming home.

Ella shuddered to think what that might be.

Spices aside, food was in slim supply at home as well. Ella gleaned what was left of the wheat that had lain unharvested in the fields in her absence. It had been rained on and pecked at by the birds, leaving little behind for her, but she gathered every grain she could and took it to the mill to be ground into flour, which she baked into lovely loaves. The De Bouchards ate them with cheese.

To augment their normal diet, Ella searched the woods for mushrooms, and put her archery skills to use hunting, though Agatha and Bertha complained especially about the wild taste of the meat, and grumbled that her goose was tough.

It was too late in the season to grow many vegetables, but Ella had some success with spinach and lettuces as long as she covered them when the nights were frosty, as well as root crops that wouldn't be ruined by a light freeze.

But her projects weren't the only ones she worked on. Madame assigned her tasks as well, often with little warning. One day over breakfast, she fixed her steely eyes on Ella, stirred her tea, and announced, "My quarters are in need of a thorough cleaning. The garbage needs carried out and burned." Madame smiled when she said this, and showed her teeth.

It was never a good sign when Madame showed her teeth, or when she smiled. The only time she ever seemed to smile was when she was causing Ella pain.

That day was no exception. Madame had taken most of Nora's clothes and belongings for herself or her daughters, but there were some items that were long out of date, or too small to be made to fit any of the De Bouchards.

Madame heaped these in Ella's arms—corsets, dresses that dated to the years before Ella and Bertie were born (which Nora had told Ella she was saving for her to wear someday), and atop the heap, the glass slippers.

"Take them out and burn them!" Madame demanded.

Ella carried the stack from the room, but instead of going outside to the burn heap, she headed up the stairs. She'd have liked to hurry, but the pile she carried was unsteady, and she didn't want to risk it toppling.

So she hadn't made it far when Madame noticed her.

"Insolent Child!" Madame snapped. "What are you doing? I told you to burn them."

"I'm keeping them."

"They're useless! Too small for anyone. They'll only attract rats."

"They're not too small." Ella told her as she continued up the stairs. Given all the work Ella did, from dawn to dusk, she'd become slimmer than she'd been before. Even the smallest dresses would fit her.

Madame growled with anger and lunged up the stairs after her. She snatched the glass slippers from atop the pile. "These aren't even real shoes. They're a useless decoration. They wouldn't fit anyone. Burn them—I'm sick of seeing them!"

"They're not useless!" Ella insisted.

"Aren't they?" Madame sneered, her face red with hot anger, her eyes glittering with challenge. "Put them on then. Put them on—if they fit, you can keep them. You can keep it all, if they fit."

Ella sat on the stairs and took hold of the slippers. She glanced up at Madame, who sneered down at her, haughty in victory.

The slippers weren't nearly the size of a grown woman's foot, but Ella had seen her mother wear them. Ella had never

been able to fit her own foot inside, not even as a child, but she had no choice but to try, given Madame's challenge.

Ella tipped the glass against her toes and slid her foot inside.

The shoe fit perfectly.

She slid the other onto her other foot.

Madame narrowed her eyes. "You little witch. Fine. Keep them! Get them out of my sight!"

Ella grabbed up the rest of the clothes and ran for the attic. She could hardly keep her tears under control until she reached it.

The glass slippers fit her. They were magic shoes, and had only ever fit her mother before.

I swelled to the size of a mouse and perched upon Ella's knee as she cried. "They're magic slippers," I told her softly. "They only fit their owner. You're their owner now."

Ella sniffled back a sob. "Yes. I've inherited them because my mother is dead. She really is dead then. There's been a part of me that's secretly hoped, since the very first moment when Madame told me she was dead, that it was a lie. That they'd hidden her, or banished her away, or she'd gone on the trade journey with my father, and she'd return one day. But the slippers never fit before. So she must be gone, then. She's never coming back."

*

Winter's snows came and went. Spring arrived, and with it, Ella's birthday. She turned sixteen alone in the attic, and I sang to her as she blew out her candle for the night, and went to sleep.

It was a long cold spring, and there was yet frost in the air when Ella's father and brother returned with no carts, no goods, and just two horses between four men. Gustav had gone with them, as much because he had nowhere else to go as for any other reason. The fourth man was Madame's cousin, Thomas. Ella hadn't known before that he existed, but there he was.

They were as ragged and threadbare as she'd ever seen them, and hungry and penniless besides, with colds and blisters

and scrapes gone infected, so that Ella first put them in the parlor near the fire, with their shoulders wrapped in blankets and their bare feet in tubs of mineral waters, as warm as they could stand them.

She insisted on serving them hot tea and steaming chicken soup before she'd let any of them tell their tale, which was just as well, because none of them could speak more than ten words without descending into a fit of coughing that went on long enough to make Ella think they might never stop.

But once they'd eaten the soup and she'd tended their sores, and bandaged the blisters and done everything else she could to make them comfortable, Bertie found his voice and explained what had happened.

"We did a fine deal of business in the far east," he told her, his voice weak. "Prices are down because merchant caravans haven't been making it through to buy. We knew we'd have trouble coming back because we had trouble going out, but we used your maps and the alternate routes you've found over the years. We made it most of the way back, farther than most." Bertie fought against a cough for most of his last sentence, then devolved into a fit of coughing.

"That's why they were so hard on us once they caught us," Robert added. "They thought we were headed east. They didn't realize until they searched our carts that we were on our way home. They were furious, then. Threw us in prison, seized our goods. Claimed we didn't have the right permits and licenses."

"The right permits and licenses?" Ella asked, confused. "The pirates?"

"Not pirates," Robert corrected. "These were government officials working at the customs offices."

Ella was perplexed. At worst, the customs officers had only ever charged them a trade tax in the past. "But you've been trading your entire life. What paperwork could they possibly need that you don't have?"

"Oh, they've made new rules, but it's all a sham," Bertie contended. "They're purposely blocking everything from going through."

"But why? What do they stand to gain from that?" Ella couldn't imagine what withholding cinnamon and silks would accomplish, other than making Madame grumpy.

Bertie and Robert exchanged looks.

Thomas, Madame's cousin, cleared his throat. "They have good reason. They are within their political rights," he assured her, with the kind of glare middle-aged men tended to give women when they thought a topic was none of their business anyway.

Ella stood. She knew the signal, and she wasn't about to argue with the man—to do so would be no more fruitful than arguing with a brick wall. "Let me fetch you more hot tea," she said, and excused herself.

She headed to the kitchen, thoughts swirling.

Something was up—something huge. Of course, she'd been feeling the pinch from the trade barriers for months, and so, no doubt, had the rest of Europe.

But what good was their dissatisfaction to the kingdoms to the east of them?

And why didn't Thomas want her discussing it?

Chapter Twenty-One

Ella made the travelers as comfortable as she possibly could, and stretched the limits of the larder to keep them fed. Geese on their way back north for the summer wouldn't normally have been her first choice for the soup pot, but when she heard them honking as they flew near the house, she didn't hesitate to grab her bow and arrow.

They ate well that evening.

Bertie was the first to regain his strength, and soon joined her in her work around the house and garden. It was when they were alone cutting hay in the hayfield, where no one could overhear them, that Bertie told her what he knew of the political motivations of the neighboring kingdoms.

"They're causing unrest on purpose. They want Europe dissatisfied with her kings," Bertie explained.

"Why?" Ella couldn't see the sense in it. The whole idea made her nervous, too, because Henry's dad was a king, and if his people became too dissatisfied with him, they might try to overthrow him and his son.

"To undermine their authority, I suppose," Bertie guessed. "They're plotting something—something more than just depriving us of goods."

"Speaking of goods, what are we going to do about the carts they've impounded? The prices of spices in the shops have risen tenfold. If your carts are as full as you say, if we could get them back and sell the imports, our financial difficulties would be over."

Bertie hung his head and sighed. "If we could get them across the border, yes. But they won't give them back without the right documents and licenses."

"Which specific permits and licenses do you need? Did they tell you?"

"Permits to trade in each of the countries we passed through—those have to bear our government seal, and you

can't fake that. They claim father's merchant license is expired, which sounds ridiculous to me, but they say the rules have changed. I ought to have a license, too, I suppose, if I'm going to have any authority." Bertie shook his head. "But that's not even the worst of it. They claim our cart horses have a disease—one I'd never heard of. They confiscated them, quarantined them, and reserve the right to destroy them to contain the disease."

"Our horses?" Ella asked.

"Just the work horses, not the Arabians, thankfully. But even if we could get the carts, and pay the impound fee, which I've no doubt will be substantial, we'll need horses to pull them home again."

Ella looked in the direction of the pasture, where their mother's horses grazed on the new spring hay. "Could the Arabians do it?"

"It's beneath them. Yes, they could technically, but considering that our last horses were confiscated and may have been destroyed—" he shuddered. "I hate to take the risk."

"What else can we do, Bertie? We've very little money left, and no assets but our land and the horses. Father can't be a merchant without capital. Even if you could get through to the east again, you've no carts to haul goods home in, and even if you bought carts or borrowed them somehow, they'd only impound those as well. Didn't you say you'd made it almost home?"

"Yes. They took our maps—"

"I still have the rest of mine—"

"Then I can show you exactly where we were."

"Perhaps we can plot a route for you to come home unhindered."

Bertie blew out a long breath. "I don't think they have any intention of letting those wagons through, no matter what the paperwork."

"Then what are we going to do, Bertie?" Ella asked. "We've no other way to make a living. The land is only enough to sustain us, and we've got taxes coming due."

Her brother shook his head. "We could take work in other households."

"And give up Caprese?"

"You're little more than a servant here! I've seen how Madame Augusta treats you."

"So you'd rather I be a servant elsewhere? Why would they treat me any differently?"

Bertie sighed. "You're right. I know you are, but Ella, you weren't there. They had no intention of letting those carts through. None."

"But the carts are rightfully ours. They're our only hope."

"I know," Bertie admitted. "And that's why I intend to go back for them, though I'll have to have my papers in order—"

"I know someone who can help with the papers," Ella assured him.

"Do you? Well that's our only bit of good news."

While they waited for their father's health to improve, Ella and Bertie poured over her maps in secret, spreading them flat on the attic floor, and using pebbles and sticks to mark possible paths.

"That bridge is out, destroyed by Saracen pirates." Bertie placed a pebble over a line on the map.

"That's a major trade artery," Ella protested.

"It *was*," Bertie corrected her. "They're doing it on purpose, you know."

"I can see that." Ella scowled at the pebbles that marked impeded routes from every possible approach. She turned again to one of her oldest maps. "There's still this mountain pass along Highline Ridge."

Bertie groaned, tired of explaining, again, why the road was not an option. "It's passible at most—at *most*—six weeks out of the year, and that's assuming a mild winter, which we haven't had."

"We haven't, but it's far enough from us, the winter there may have been entirely different."

"It's a hundred miles out of our way—"

"Which is why they won't be guarding it as closely."

"And that map is a century old! Who's to say there's even a road there at all, anymore? None of the newer maps show it."

"Another reason no one will be watching it."

"They're not watching it because it's not an option." Bertie shook his head. "Besides, in order to use that road, we'd have to wait until July. It's April. I say we take the main route."

"But it has the most checkpoints."

"It's also the most direct route, and if our paperwork is in order, the checkpoints won't matter. Speaking of, we need to get that paperwork."

By the next week, their father had regained his strength well enough to make the trek into Charmont. Ella dressed as Allard, and hoped, this time, that Jerome would recognize his friend.

He did, and was eager to help, save for one detail, "I can't get you a government seal, not that many times over, nor even once. The seal's in the castle. It's for official paperwork only. I don't have access."

"You were the right hand man of the king's son, and you're telling me you can't gain access to the seal long enough to imprint a dozen documents?"

Jerome laughed. "You were Henry's right hand man, Allard. Can you gain access to the seal?" His laugh faded slightly, and he leaned in closer. "His pennant's not flying from the turret, because he's not here on official business, but he is at the castle. Some kind of top-secret meeting. I wouldn't know, but Sigi stopped by to visit."

"How is Sigi?" Ella tried to keep her voice casual, and prayed Jerome wouldn't notice that she'd gone suddenly flush at the news that Henry was just up the hill.

"Taller. Otherwise the same."

"Still needs a haircut?"

"Always." Jerome laughed.

Ella thought a moment. "What's the usual course for obtaining an imprint of the seal?"

"You've got to fill out a request, and then the Committee of Commerce reviews it, but they can't do anything without a

majority vote, and they're half of them gone—something about our trade agreements to the east. I don't know if you've noticed, but goods haven't been making it through."

"I have noticed."

Jerome nodded. "Without a majority of the committee, nothing can be approved. Everyone's paperwork is backed up. There are more steps past that, but none of them matter without committee approval."

Ella suspected their neighbors to the east had arranged to disable the committee on purpose, or at least saw it as a pleasant side effect of the rest of their intrigues. Whatever the case, it left her with only one remaining option. "Do you know where in the castle the government seal is kept?"

"Of course I do, but—oh, I'm not sneaking in with you." Jerome shook his head.

"I'm not asking you to come with me," Ella assured him. "Just tell me where to find it, explain how to use it, and draw up the papers so I have something to imprint."

Jerome grimaced. "If you're caught, I have no idea who drew up the papers for you."

"Of course."

Once Bertie and Robert had given Jerome all the information he needed to write up their documents, they left him to his work, and went for lunch.

"What are you thinking?" Robert asked his daughter as they sat around a small table to eat.

"I know a way into the castle." Ella didn't tell them that the route she knew of led into the stables, wine cellar, and dungeon. It didn't matter--those parts had to connect with the rest somehow.

"So, what?" Bertie pressed. "You're going to sneak in, find the seal, imprint the documents, and sneak out again, just like that?"

Ella felt her face flush. On some irrational level, she hoped, somehow, in the midst of her adventure, to find Henry. But of course, that would endanger the entire mission, so she couldn't let herself be distracted by thoughts of him, or swayed from her

course by the slightest bit.

"You need the permits with the seal, don't you?" Ella clarified.

"There's no way around it," Robert said flatly. "If we've any hope of getting our carts back, we'll need those permits."

"Then I really have no choice, do I?"

By the time they finished their lunch and returned to Jerome's shop, he'd finished their documents, as well as something else.

"This is a sketch of the interior of the castle," he explained. "There's more to it, of course, but I've drawn the relevant parts. The seal is located here, in the king's private office."

He told her precisely which shelf it would be on, and drew her a sketch of the cabinet, as well. "Now, the office is heavily guarded when the king is in the office, but when he's elsewhere, say in the throne room or his chambers, the rest of the guards accompany him, leaving only two guards, and they stand facing the throne room, before these two pillars, here, and here," Jerome indicated their positions on the sketch. "There's a small staircase that leads up from the kitchen, and opens to the hallway behind this pillar. If a man comes up through that staircase, the guards won't see him unless they happen to turn around."

"The staircase leads from the kitchen?" Ella clarified.

"Yes. That's the route the staff use to bring the king his tea when he's in his office."

"Where in the kitchen is the door?"

Jerome tried to describe for her how to find it, but apologized that he'd only used the route a couple of times when he was sneaking a snack, and didn't know it well. "It's the far corner, away from the fires. The kitchen is huge, you know. But there's only one other door in that corner of the room, and it's the one leading down to the wine cellar. So take the steps going up, not down, and you can't miss it."

Ella grinned.

Jerome shook his head. "Not that any of this is going to do you any good."

"Why not?"

"You'll never get into the castle, not unless you're on official business. You may be Henry's friend, but he's not officially in town, and anyway, none of the guards know you. I doubt they've even heard your name, unless they happen to be fans of the tournaments, and even then, they can't let you through without authorization."

"Don't worry about that. You've been a great help. Thank you."

Ella led her father and brother on horseback through the streets of Charmont, toward the river, where she picked up the path to the healing mineral springs. As the path narrowed, they left their horses tied in an out-of-sight spot where they'd have water and grass, where they might hopefully not get into any mischief.

"We're going to be late getting back to Caprese tonight," Ella acknowledged, once they'd established that the horses were secure.

"Madame Augusta won't be happy," Robert said gravely, but then his tone brightened. "Then again, she never is."

Ella's heart burned with words she wasn't sure she ought to speak, but they swelled inside her until she had to let them out. "I wish you hadn't married her."

"I do feel sorry about that, in some ways," Robert told her. "But she paid our taxes last year, and Thomas helped fund our last journey in exchange for a cut of the profits, which have yet to materialize. We'd have lost Caprese without her. Thomas lent me the money I just paid your friend Jerome. I'm afraid they're a necessary evil."

Bertie joined the conversation. "If we can get the carts back and sell our goods, we can pay off Thomas and you can get rid of that woman."

"It's a marriage on paper only," Robert added. "Given the circumstances, legally, I should be able to set her aside, but we've got to have the funds to do it properly, or the courts will award her Caprese as settlement."

Ella felt resolve solidifying inside her. "I've got to get

these permits stamped, then. This mission cannot fail."

As they approached the mineral springs, Ella explained to her father and brother her intended route. "I don't know how long it will take me to reach the throne room, and then to leave again after. If anyone's around, I may have to hide and wait until they leave, which could be minutes or hours, there's no telling. All I can ask is that you stay here and wait for me to return. I don't know how long that will take."

"How will we know if something's happened to you?"

"Nothing's going to happen," Ella assured them. "I'm going to be very careful."

She'd tucked the permits securely inside her vest, next to the inner padding that disguised her figure. They reached the springs. "The two of you really ought to soak in the springs. It will do you a world of good after all you've been through, and I'm going to be an hour or two at the very least, and quite possibly far longer."

To her relief, the men agreed, and she left them in the grotto, where the afternoon light poured through the hole in the rock above.

I flew just ahead of her, lighting the path through the tunnel to the wine cellar, and then up the stairs to the kitchen.

She had to wait some time at the kitchen before she could get through without being seen. Even then, I wasn't sure if she'd be able to find the stairs up to the throne room, but they were, as Jerome had said, next to the wine cellar stairs, and she darted away without being seen.

The next step was far more precarious. Here, instead of kitchen girls and cooks who might wonder at the stranger in their midst, there were armed guards, trained to question, detain, or attack anyone who they didn't recognize as being authorized to be there.

Ella would have to be even more careful.

She reached the top of the stairs and silently pushed the door outward just far enough that she could hear sounds from the hallway beyond her, and peek out enough to glimpse the backs of the guards who stood at the pillars.

A deep drone, the echo of distant voices, reverberated through the hall beyond. Ella pushed the door open a bit further and turned her ear to the sound.

Men's voices. Two of them, deep in heated discussion.

"…that's not what I'm hearing, Father. Not what I've heard at all. If you'd talk to people—"

"I've spoken with my advisors on the matter."

"Yes, but *real* people, Father. People on the streets—"

"My advisors are real people. Are you suggesting your uncle Richard is not a real person? What does that make you?" A throaty chuckle followed.

Uncle Richard?

It could only be King Henry and his son speaking, then.

And King Henry only had one son.

Ella's heart thundered inside her. Henry was out there, close enough she could hear his voice. Close enough she could run to him and embrace him, were it not for the guards and the fact that he probably hated her for lying to him.

"Uncle Richard," the prince began, choosing his words cautiously, "does not always share your best interests."

"Nonsense. He wants what's best for this kingdom."

"He wants what's best for *him*," the younger Henry countered. "All I'm saying is that, if we don't stop the trade blockade, there will be an uprising."

"And you think Richard is behind it?" The king's tone was more accusational than questioning.

"Whether he's behind it or simply taking advantage of it, the end result will be the same. We've got to lift the blockade and restore trade—"

"I understand that as well as anyone, but what you don't seem to appreciate is the complexity of doing so. The situation to the east is delicate. Some might say, precarious. If you go storming in there and ignite a war, what will happen? Something far worse than a shortage of spices and silks, I can assure you."

"But if we wait until the people hate us for waiting, then when the war starts, it will be everyone against us."

Ella swallowed hard. She wanted to stay and listen to every word Henry and his father had to say, but as intriguing as it was, and highly relevant to her own father's situation, she had a mission to accomplish. None of what happened in the east would matter if Ella couldn't stamp the permits that might allow her father to reclaim is goods, and the conversation between the Henrys in the throne room gave her the opportunity she needed to sneak into the king's office.

Jerome had indicated clearly on the map that the office would be to her right. The throne room was ahead to her left, past the majority of the guards—the direction from which the king's and prince's voices echoed.

Carefully, silently, Ella pushed the door open further.

"We're not waiting on anything," the king continued. "I've sent half the Committee of Commerce to work out a trade agreement."

"Half the committee? Why didn't you go yourself?"

As Henry questioned his father, Ella took her first careful step out from the shelter of the doorway.

"Honestly, Son." The king's voice grew deeper. He sounded regretful, even pained. "They told me it wouldn't be safe. If it's not safe for me, it's most certainly not safe for you, either."

As they spoke, Ella tiptoed carefully to the open doorway on her right.

"If it's not safe for us, how do you think our merchants feel? They're the ones being captured, fined, their goods impounded, their horses confiscated."

"Those are only nasty rumors, circulated to arouse anger."

"No, Father, it's all true. I've talked to men myself. If it were otherwise, then where are the goods?"

Ella reached the office while the men argued. She found the seal and pulled it down from the shelf, carefully removing the permits from inside her vest. She imprinted each one with care, taking time to make sure everything was properly aligned. No doubt the permits would be scrutinized by the border officials.

They had to be perfect.

"They're just—being held," the king protested, sputtering.

"Held? Against their will, impounded, confiscated—"

"It's not as bad as you say. My advisors keep me informed—"

"And my advisors say otherwise. So who do we trust?"

"I trust my men." The king's voice hardened. "And I trust you to do your duty, which at this time, is to prove yourself on the tournament circuit—the *western* circuit."

"I don't believe—" Henry began.

But his father cut him off. "That is your duty. I am done discussing it. My position remains unchanged. You may join me for dinner in half an hour, but I expect you to be on your way west by morning."

A cacophony of footsteps echoed through the marble hall as the king and his guards walked toward the door of the throne room.

Ella froze, her hand hovered over the press of the seal.

Were they coming to the king's office?

No one entered, and the sound of footsteps faded into the distance. They'd gone down the hall in the other direction, then.

Ella sealed the last of the permits, tucked them safely into her vest, and set the press silently back on its shelf, just as she had found it.

Then she slipped to the doorway and crept stealthily toward the small door.

She was halfway there—eight steps out, eight remaining, when she heard another set of footsteps coming from the throne room.

The king and his guards had already left. Who had remained behind?

Ella froze like a rabbit, her only hope that whoever walked past wouldn't noticed her as long as she didn't move.

"Guards?" It was Prince Henry's voice. "There's someone behind you. Attend to him," he said, and continued on his way down the hall.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The guards turned on Ella in an instant, blocking her way with their spears.

She had less than a second to decide whether to fight, run, or call for help.

"Henry," she called, not bothering to disguise her voice.

"Cinderella?" He turned back, hurried closer, and recognized her in spite of the cap that hid her hair.

"I'm sorry," he told the guards. "My mistake. This is a guest of mine. Back to your stations."

He cupped Ella's elbow and led her into his father's office, closing the heavy doors after them.

"What are you doing here? How did you get in? May I remove your cap?" Henry's questions ran together without any pause in between for Ella to answer.

She tugged off her cap herself, and Henry's fingers swept back over her hair, clasping her head, pulling her close against his chest.

"Cinderella," he whispered, her name precious on his lips. "What are you doing here, really?"

"Borrowing your seal," Ella admitted, pointing to the device before pulling the permits from her vest.

"Whatever for?"

"My father is a merchant. I assure you, your advisors are far better informed than your father's. My father's entire caravan—the goods of a full year's journey—has been impounded by the customs officials, on the claim that we don't possess the right paperwork to travel." She set the paperwork on the shelf as she spoke.

Henry winced as though in pain. "I hate being right. What are you going to do?"

"Reclaim them."

"You know they'll never let you through."

"We have no choice but to attempt to find a way. We'll

lose our estate otherwise."

Henry leaned down and pressed his forehead to hers. "Don't go. I'll send anyone else in your stead, but you cannot go."

"My father and brother are going. I'm needed at home."

Henry's sigh of relief washed over her in a warm breath scented faintly with apples.

She glanced at his lips, and remembered that she'd once thought he might have been going to kiss her.

"I should go with them," Henry murmured, his eyes smoldering.

"Your father forbade it. He wants you back on the circuit, and you know if you don't arrive by the weekend, he'll hear of it, guess precisely where you've gone, and send men after you."

Henry closed his eyes and groaned. "There's no way around it."

Ella gave him a tiny smile. "I hate being right." She quoted his earlier statement back to him.

He grinned at her. "It's so very good to see you. You've no idea how worried I was for your safety after you rode off. I second guessed sending you away, not that I had any choice."

"I was fine." Her voice broke as she remembered that journey home, and the news she received when she arrived there.

"Are you sure?" he studied her face, his brow knit with concern, one hand clasping her waist. "You've lost weight. I can feel it, even through this padded disguise. Have you been ill?"

"I've been working."

"Training?"

"Not much, just working," Ella didn't want to confess to him how awful her life had become. She'd die of embarrassment if he looked at her with pity. She hastened to change the subject. "Listen, you're exactly right about the kingdoms to the east. They want our people to be dissatisfied with your father's rule."

"Do you know anything more about what they're

plotting?" Henry asked.

Ella shook her head. "Very little."

"I'll tell you what I know. My cousin Richard has been winning at the tournaments there. The people are calling him a great hero."

"A hero? For winning tournaments?"

"It's only swordplay now, but can you guess what they're building up to?"

"If the people are dissatisfied with your father, and if they can be made to view Richard as a hero…" Ella put the pieces together haltingly, aware of how close Henry held her against him, and of how much she'd missed his presence and the sound of his voice.

He finished the puzzle for her. "They'll overthrow us and crown Richard or his father in my father's place."

"No. They can't—do you know what happens to overthrown kings?"

"The best case scenario is that they're locked away in a tower somewhere, but I've no doubt Richard would happily behead me."

"What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? If I try to resolve the issues in the east, my father will send men to bring me home, like a recalcitrant child. My best hope, really my only hope, is that merchants like your father will find a way through the blockade. If we can restore trade, the people will have nothing to grumble about. They're otherwise well provided for."

"Taxes have been a bit steep," Ella noted.

"Have they?" Henry looked concerned. "They're not supposed to be. Father was going to lower them."

"They're higher, and not only for us. I've heard others talk. They're at wartime levels"

Henry scowled. "I will look into that. Thank you for the tip." He smiled at her. "I could always trust you."

Ella bit her lower lip. "Even when I pretended to be someone else?"

Henry's sudden burst of laughter surprised her.

"What?" she asked.

"How could Hugo of Adalaard ever judge Allard of Caprese for claiming to be someone he wasn't?"

A blush rose to Ella's cheeks, and she looked down, realizing for the first time that her crime hadn't been any worse than his. Not really.

Henry cupped her cheek with his hand, and lifted her chin so that she looked back up at him. "I have one grave regret about our parting, which I have lamented time and again since that day."

"What?" Ella asked.

"I never got to kiss you." He leaned down and touched his lips to hers, at first lightly. He pulled away just far enough to look into her eyes.

Ella wanted to beg him to kiss her again, but she didn't have to. Henry made a small moaning noise and leaned in closer, pulling her tighter against him as he did so.

She clutched his shoulders, aware on some vague level that he was bigger and stronger than when she'd last seen him. But mostly she was just aware of him, of the fact that his usually-scruffy chin was close-shaved (probably out of deference to his father), of the way he held her as though he'd wanted nothing more in forever.

Something echoed in the distance down the hallway, and the two of them broke instantly apart.

"I should be going," she whispered, and carefully picked up the permits, tucking them away inside her vest, while Henry placed her cap back upon her head.

He nodded. "I'll go first. Stay tight behind me. Were you headed for the little door to the kitchen?"

"From there I can leave by way of the wine cellar and the mineral springs."

"Smart girl." Henry grinned. "Alright, here we go."

He opened the doors wide. Ella stayed close behind him as he stepped toward the small door. Once he'd nearly reached it, she darted behind it.

As she did so, she heard a voice speaking from further

down the hall.

"Henry?"

"Uncle Richard."

"Is someone with you?"

"No, I'm quite alone. Do you need something?"

"I was looking for your father."

"I believe he was headed to dinner shortly."

"Yes, of course." Richard's footsteps faded away, followed moments later by those of Prince Henry.

Only then did Ella slip away reluctantly down the stairs, though her heart begged her to go after Henry and kiss him again.

No, the very best thing she could do for him was to fulfill the hope he'd expressed—restoring free passage in the eastern trade routes again.

Because until that happened, Henry and his father, and indeed, the entire kingdom, were in danger.

*

Once again, Ella had to wait behind the door in the kitchen until the room was clear for her to proceed. But in spite of that delay, she eventually made her way safely down the tunnel and back to her father and brother, who were relaxing in the mineral springs.

"I'm back," she announced once she reached them. The sun had not even set, though the light that reached through the gap in the rock was greatly faded from what it had been earlier in the day.

"Did you have any trouble?"

"Nothing serious." She'd debated whether she should tell them what she'd learned, and decided it would be in their best interest to know everything she knew. So, skipping over the part where Henry embraced her and kissed her, she filled them in on every little bit she'd learned.

The two of them dressed while she kept her back turned to them.

"The king knows about it, and he's choosing to do nothing?" Robert clarified once Ella had told the bulk of what

she'd overheard.

"It *is* a delicate situation," she acknowledged in the king's defense. "Trade routes have always existed at the expense of the countries they pass through."

"The countries benefit from the trade routes," Robert argued. "They get their duties and tariffs and import fees. They profit by feeding and lodging merchants, and charging tolls for the use of roads and bridges."

But Bertie scowled. "I think she's on to something, Father."

"What do you mean?" Ella asked, surprised that he'd suggested she'd hinted at a larger plan, since she was too distracted thinking about Henry's kiss to contemplate conspiracy theories.

"You've been on enough trade routes to have seen it yourself," Bertie explained. "Trade routes equal power. Those who control the trade routes have power."

"Are you suggesting the kingdoms to our east are forbidding the passage of merchants as a way to increase their power?" Robert grunted. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Exactly," Bertie pressed. "It doesn't make sense for them to suppress trade. No, there's a power struggle at play. Those who control the trade routes have power. Who wants to control the trade routes?"

Ella pictured the trade route maps. "We know our kingdom isn't doing it, and neither are our neighbors. That leaves—the Saracens?"

"They've got the most to gain," Bertie pointed out.

"But it wasn't the Saracens who impounded our carts and questioned our permits," Robert argued. "It was the kingdoms to the east of us."

"But *why*?" Bertie pressed. "They've got no motive for doing that, not unless someone else, someone powerful, had infiltrated their governments."

"You think they've taken over the kingdoms?" Ella asked, unsure how such a thing could be accomplished without the rest of the world finding out.

"Not officially," Bertie said. "But on some level, somehow, they're exerting their will."

"But how?" Robert asked. "And why?"

"I don't know." Bertie shook his head. "But I don't think we're ever going to stop this until we find out."

By that time, both men were dressed and ready to leave, so they set out on their way, dropping the debate in favor of discussing the preparations they still needed to make for their journey.

"I think we need to leave as soon as we can," Bertie insisted.

"Gustav isn't fit to travel," Robert pointed out. "He might not be ready for weeks yet."

"Then we should leave him behind," Bertie concluded. "We may be headed into danger, and I'd rather he didn't get hurt."

"I don't want either of you getting hurt," Ella told them.

"We'll do our best, of course," Bertie assured her. "We just can't make you any promises."

*

Gustav was not happy about being left behind, but since he was barely strong enough to sit up, he couldn't make too much fuss.

Ella had made copies of her maps to send with them, and gave them every coin she'd saved. "You will try to stay safe?" Ella asked more than once.

And more than once, they assured her they'd do their best.

Ella watched them ride away—her father and brother in front, on horseback, three more of their Arabian horses, riderless, behind them, and Thomas on horseback at the rear.

They'd left only three horses—Mirage, and the pair who pulled their carriage. The household would have to get by until they returned. If their plan worked, they'd reclaim their carts of goods, and the Arabians would pull the carts home. It wasn't far, and if everything went smoothly, they might return within a month.

One month passed, and then another. Spring gave way to

the heat of summer, and Ella did all the usual work of the estate—planting the garden, harvesting the spring wheat, cutting hay, picking berries, sweeping the chimneys, painting the house, tending to the animals—as well as the work of making Madame and her daughters feel as though they lived in some semblance of luxury. On top of that, she sold whatever she could—extra berries, non-essential furniture, a couple of goats—anything she could spare in hopes that when the tax bill came, she'd be able to pay it regardless of whether her father and brother were able to bring home the carts.

Gustav's condition improved, and though he was getting on in years, he was able to be of some help around the estate. Ella loved to send him down to the stream to fish. She knew it wasn't difficult work, and she never had time to spare for it, but the fish he caught were often the best food they ate all week.

There came a particularly sweltering stretch of summer, after the men had been gone ten weeks, when Madame complained of a smell in her room.

"I'm sure something's died in there and now it's rotting," Madame complained. "I need you to find it and get rid of it at once!"

Ella curtsied and complied, delving into the room which had always before been her mother's, though she could hardly recognize it anymore.

Madame was not a neat or tidy person. In addition to always keeping her curtains closed (Ella opened those in the rest of the house, but preferred to avoid Madame's domain), she often ate in her room, and there were dirty dishes and even bits of food lying about with clothes and shoes and beauty oils and creams.

Any of those could contribute to the smell, which was so strong Ella choked and gagged repeatedly in her attempts to find the source and eliminate it.

Ella carried in several baskets for sorting through the mess. She opened the curtains so she'd have enough light to see. She then stacked dishes on a tray, and held up Madame's clothes one by one, eyeing them for stains, daring to sniff them only if

she wasn't sure whether the clothes needed washing, or simply needed to be put back inside the wardrobe.

She'd made some progress, but not yet located the source of the smell, when she lifted a blouse from atop a pile of other clothes on a footstool, and recognized what lay under it.

Brown leather.

Stitching.

Chainmail.

Ella's heart rammed with a beat of betrayal and she picked up the leather helmet that matched her armor.

She'd last seen the helmet in Paris when four men had held her by her arms and legs, and Raedwald had pulled the helmet from her head. He'd flung it down in the street. She could still hear the clatter of chainmail hitting the cobblestones, and could feel her burning shame at being discovered.

Her helmet had lain there on the cobbles, untouched. Henry had broken free, leapt upon Mirage's back, hauled her atop the horse with him, and ridden away. He hadn't had any chance to pick up her helmet, nor would it have been a priority to attempt to do so.

Raedwald and his men scrambled to their horses to pursue them. Did one of them take the time to pick up her helmet?

And if so, how did it make its way to Caprese, and into Madame's bedroom?

No, it couldn't be the same helmet. Had her mother made her a second one, cut from the scraps of the same leather? But they'd used all the chainmail on the first, and that had come from Persia.

No goods had made it through from Persia since then.

Ella stepped toward the window, inspecting the helmet in the light.

She recognized each scuff, the places rubbed smooth where it wore against her skin, the links of mail in the corner that had been caught by a sword and torn loose.

But no, those links were now fastened tight as before, and two bright brass links joined the other tarnished ones.

So, it was her helmet, but it had been repaired before being

returned.

"Have you found the source of the smell?" Madame De Bouchard asked from the doorway.

Ella tried to hide the helmet from her sight, but Augusta spotted it.

"Oh!" Madame's face twisted with expression, something like a snarl that morphed into a greedy smile, and then a frown. "You found that, did you? Recognize it? It *is* yours, then? I did wonder…not enough to ask you to come down out of the chimney, but I did wonder."

Down out of the chimney? Ella had spent two days some weeks before, making her way slowly up the chimneys, chiseling out the worst of the accumulated soot, and scrubbing the walls somewhat closer to clean so that, come winter, there wouldn't be enough soot to catch fire, and they wouldn't have to worry about chimney fires. She'd had to brace herself against the inner walls of the chimney—hard work, and usually very expensive to hire someone to do, since most men were either too large to fit the space, or not strong enough to brace themselves in place while scrubbing.

It was important work, a dirty job, and a lonely one. Once she disappeared inside, she didn't see or hear from anyone until she came out the top and then down by way of the roof hours later.

Madame stared at the helmet, her lips pinched together as though she pondered something. Then she clucked her tongue and smiled. "Do you know who brought it? I didn't recognize him at first, he was so out of place, and alone, which was quite unexpected. It was very strange to see him at our gate. The prince! Prince Henry! He didn't introduce himself, which I thought quite rude, nor did he ask my name. He simply asked to see Cinderella.

"Cinderella! Have you ever heard such a funny name? I certainly never have. I told him we have no one by that name here. Then he asked for Allard. Allard of Caprese.

"What could I tell him? We have no one by that name either. He asked to see the lady of the house, and I assured him

I am the lady of the house, and then he looked quite perplexed. He said he was in search of a young woman of sixteen, with flaxen hair perhaps in a long braid, of uncommon strength and agility, with blue eyes and a slim waist." Madame's face twisted with distaste. "He said a few other things about your appearance which I disagree with very much, but nonetheless, I realized he meant you. So I asked him, 'do you mean my servant Ella?'"

"He said, yes, Ella, that must be who he sought, but she was a lady and not a servant. So I told him in that he was mistaken, for Ella is a servant of the lowliest status, practically a slave. He questioned me, but I assured him I am the lady of this house, and neither of my daughters have flaxen hair, and Ella is not my daughter. I suggested Ella had certainly lied to him, for she was a dishonest child of many fanciful notions, and he would do best to avoid her forever in the future."

Madame's eyes sparkled as she told her story, and she looked at Ella triumphantly.

Ella gripped the helmet tight in her hands. It took all her self-control not to speak to her step-mother.

"He did not take kindly to this information, as you can well imagine," Madame simpered. "He gave me that helmet and asked me to pass it along to you, and he rode away. But you know, he was not the first person to ask me about Allard of Caprese. I never understood before who such a person could be, but after talking to the prince, I made the connection. You are Allard of Caprese, aren't you? That's why you wore those silly pants when you returned to us. You're some kind of half-man freak."

Madame Augusta threw her head back and laughed. "You freakish child. You freakish child! Someone else has been asking for this Allard, someone quite intent on finding him. And so I sent word to him that you are indeed here."

Ella dared to use her voice at last. "Who?"

But Madame only smiled at her, the same gloating smile she'd worn for most of her story. "You'll find out soon enough. I believe he's eager to see you." She turned and started back

down the hall, calling over her shoulder, "I expect that room to be perfect when next I see it."

Ella stared after the woman, and tried to convince herself the story wasn't true.

But she held the evidence in her hands. How else would her helmet have made it home—and mended, no less? Henry had promised her he'd sneak away one day, alone (just as Madame had said). Of course he'd have gone back and found her helmet on the street in Paris, and had it repaired, and delivered it to her.

Of course the story was real.

And while Ella had been choking on soot in the chimney, Madame had told Henry the worst of lies.

It was one thing for her to pretend to be a man in order to fight in tournaments, but another thing entirely for a servant to lie about being noble.

Royals were only supposed to associate with royals. Because there were so few royals, royalty could stoop to befriending nobility. Sometimes, on rare occasions, a royal would even marry a noble. They were always criticized for doing so, and everyone would frown on them for it, but it was still possible.

But royals and servants could not associate. They wouldn't speak at all, unless it was necessary to accomplish the most straightforward task, and then their conversation would end the instant the critical message was conveyed. They belonged to two completely different worlds. It was a crime for a servant to even touch a royal, unless they were specifically asked to do so (for example, in helping them mount a horse—but even then, their assistants were exclusively noble, so it would be a rare thing, indeed).

If Henry believed that she'd tricked him, that he'd kissed a servant girl—and of course he'd believe Madame! He'd have every reason to. Besides her position as lady of the house, and her very convincing skills for lying, Henry would have no reason to doubt her.

He knew Ella had lied to him before about being a man. So

it required no stretch of the imagination to think she would have just as easily lied about being noble.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Somehow, Ella finished cleaning the room. She found a maggot-infested half-eaten piece of chicken meat under a hat that would never be the same. Once she got rid of it and opened the windows to clear the air, the smell of the room improved dramatically.

She did the work in a daze, her heart clenching with pain.

Henry would hate her. He'd despise her for enticing him to kiss her. He'd loathe her for lying, and would never, ever trust her again.

The thoughts pounded against her skull with aching throbs, driven home by every agonized beat of her heart. So overwhelming was her anguish, that she was nearly done cleaning the room before it occurred to her to wonder about what Madame had been talking about at the end of her announcement.

What was it she'd said? Someone else had asked her about Allard of Caprese?

A man, wasn't it? She'd specifically referred to him as "he". She'd said *he* was quite intent on finding Allard.

Who could that be?

All the men on the tournament circuit knew her as Allard, but why would any of them be intent on finding her? Jerome had enjoyed chatting with her when she'd visited his charter shop, but he certainly hadn't seemed to care strongly about her visit. It was doubtful he'd later become intent on finding her.

Who else was there? Sure, Allard had friends—Dominic, Rolf, even Sigi. They might go out of their way to talk to her, but they wouldn't seek her out intently.

Had Madame been exaggerating? But why would she do that? Why would she mention this searcher at all? Madame Augusta never had anything to do with Ella unless she needed something from her, except maybe to tell her bad news and watch her squirm.

Was that it, then? Ella carried the dirty laundry away to wash, and pondered Madame's motives. Granted, Ella had been too stunned by what she'd just heard to pay close attention to Madame's words or expression, but she'd seemed pleased, in her sadistic way, to have the chance to contact this mysterious individual, to tell him she'd found Allard.

Which meant the man who sought Allard must be planning to do him some harm.

Ella dropped the basket of laundry and forgot to breathe for several long seconds.

No, no, Madame couldn't have meant Raedwald. Sure, he'd been intent on hurting her during their last encounter in Paris, but he was a very busy man, and off at tournament in the east, besides.

Surely he wouldn't care enough about getting revenge on her, to bother seeking her out.

Would he?

No, he wouldn't.

But, if he did, if he really was that angry, that dead-set on revenge…what would he do to her once he found her?

*

Ella spent the next three weeks fighting her increasing fears.

Her father and brother had yet to return, and their delay was not a promising sign. They should have been back long before.

Henry must hate her. He'd probably hated her for weeks, while she'd been clinging to the happy memory of his kiss. She felt so very foolish.

And who was it Madame had sent word to, telling him she'd identified Allard? Whoever it was, they hadn't arrived, and Ella could think of no other likely candidate than Raedwald.

She became jumpy, always watching over her shoulder, listening for the sound of approaching hooves, counting her coins and wondering how she'd ever come up with enough to pay their taxes.

She consulted me sometimes, at night when she couldn't sleep.

"What if I used one of my wishes on tax money?" she asked me.

"The magic would end at midnight," I reminded her. "Whatever money you wished for would be gone."

"Yes, but if I wished for it just before I handed it over, and they counted it and made note that we'd paid, then once it disappeared, it wouldn't be our fault, not that they could ever prove."

"That would keep Caprese in the family for one more year," I admitted. "But what would you do the next year? You'd only have two wishes left."

Ella sighed and stared up at the dark ceiling, which was really just the underside of the roof. "What else can I use my wishes on? Can I wish my father and brother home again with their carts of goods?"

"You could try it," I told her, careful not to offer any false hope in my tone or expression. "But the magic has its limits, and that's a bold wish indeed. It might take more than one wish to make it happen. Even if it worked, and you got all you asked for, at midnight when everything went back to the way it was before, how would you keep them here? You'd only be buying time, and not much of it, at that."

"What good are wishes if they can't accomplish anything I want?" Ella asked. "I can understand now why my mother asked for glass slippers. If you can't have anything worth having, why not have something pointless instead?"

"What good are wishes?" I asked, feeling undone and useless myself. "Rapscallion rigmarole! What good are they? Don't they give you hope? Aren't they the unspoken promise that something could be better, if only you took the time to ask?"

"Hope?" Ella questioned, her voice trembling. She took a deep breath. "Fine, then. I wish for everything to turn out all right, that I might live happily ever after."

"You don't mean that. That's not a real wish."

"Oh, but it is," she insisted, her voice on the verge of breaking. "It's all I want. Is that so much to ask?"

"Bamboozling bumbershoots! It isn't anything. It's not a *thing.* And anyway, it will end at midnight, and then you'll be down to two wishes for all of the rest of your life."

"But I wish it. I wish for everything to turn out all right, that I might live happily ever after. There. Now you have to do it."

"All right then, fine." Since I had no say in the matter, I gathered myself up and spun toward the ceiling, raining down glittering fairy dust all around until I fell, exhausted, to the floor.

"Is it done?" Ella whispered.

"It's done, then," I told her, having fulfilled my role in the wish.

"What's changed?" She asked.

"I don't know," I admitted.

From below us, on the first floor of the house, the chimes of the great hall clock echoed up to the rafters, striking twelve times.

Midnight.

It was over.

Ella cried herself to sleep.

*

The next morning Ella awoke before the dawn. Her steps were lighter, and I sensed a renewed hope in her, though it pained me to see it, because I did not expect anything to have changed.

And indeed, the chickens had laid very few eggs (the weather being so hot and dry of late), the calf was missing, and Madame and her daughters were in particularly sour moods.

But Ella skipped through it all, eyes bright, alert to whatever might come.

She found the calf down the road and brought him home, then decided to weed the front gardens, which were long overdue for attention. It was while she was busy with this work that the royal messenger arrived on horseback, creamy-white

paper folded in his hand, impressed with the royal seal.

Ella hopped up from her weeding, brushed the dirt from her hands onto her apron, and greeted him.

"A message," he declared, holding out the paper, "for Lady Ella of Caprese."

"I'm Lady Ella of Caprese," Ella told him, and held out her hand.

The messenger looked at her hand, which still had dirt under the fingernails from weeding the garden. He sniffed. "The Lady of the house."

"I am the lady of the house," Ella insisted.

He handed over the paper with marked reluctance, and rode away.

Ella looked at her name on the outside for only an instant before breaking the seal and reading the words inside.

Lady Ella of Caprese,

You are hereby invited to a royal ball in honor of Prince Henry, which will be given this coming Saturday at 7 in the evening, at King Henry's castle in Charmont. This invitation is required for admission.

Cordially,

The Royal House of Charmont

Hardly had Ella finished reading the words when Madame De Bouchard crept up from behind her and snatched the paper from her hand.

"That's not yours," Ella protested, reaching for it. "Give it back."

"Silence!" Madame shouted. "Don't touch it—you'll tear it in half!"

Ella had read the part about needing the invitation to get into the ball, and knew Madame was heartless enough to tear it herself if she felt so inclined. That wasn't something Ella could risk, not when there was some possibility that she might see Henry again.

Granted, he hated her. But she'd wished her wish, and

surely the invitation had arrived because of that. Everything would work out all right now. Saturday was only four days away.

Ella withdrew her hand.

Agatha and Bertha called to their mother from the doorway, asking what the message was about.

Madame Augusta read the note to herself while they questioned her, then barked at them, "Girls, come here!"

The two girls spilled outside, tripping over one another as they each fought to be first.

"What is it?" Agatha asked.

Bertha elbowed her in the ribs.

Madame De Bouchard ignored them. "You are hereby invited to a royal ball in honor of Prince Henry, which will be given this coming Saturday at 7 in the evening, at King Henry's castle in Charmont. This invitation is required for admission. Cordially, The Royal House of Charmont," she read aloud.

"It's *the* ball!" Agatha squealed before her mother had even quite finished.

"The ball everyone's been talking about for days and days," Bertha added.

"What ball?" Ella asked. She was never allowed to accompany the girls when they went visiting around to the other noble houses in the area, so she was the last to hear any of the gossip. Normally this didn't bother her, but if it involved Prince Henry, she was willing to put aside even the embarrassment of acknowledging her ignorance in front of her step-sisters, to ask what they knew.

Madame led them all back inside the house. "The prince turns twenty years old this fall. He's expected to marry at that age. He was supposed to have met royal princesses while on the tournament circuit, but that's yielded nothing, so now they're opening up to the idea of noble ladies."

Ella listened in shocked surprise. She'd never noticed Henry paying any attention to royal princesses at the tournaments, though of course they were always in the stands, and often awarded prizes to the winners of their favorite events.

She, herself, had once been kissed on the cheek by a princess after winning at swords, but she couldn't recall when Henry ever had.

Madame De Bouchard continued, "The prince has made a deal with his father. He'll choose a bride at the ball in exchange for being allowed to marry beneath him. Given how unpopular the Royal House of Charmont has become, what with the trade blockade and high taxes, I'm sure the king is hoping the event will improve their esteem in the eyes of all the people." She laughed.

But her laughter was drowned out by Agatha and Bertha, who were holding hands and jumping up and down and squealing, "A bride! He'll choose a bride! We're invited! He might choose me!" And other similar statements all run together on top of one another.

"But, it's my invitation," Ella corrected Madame.

The girls didn't even hear her.

"Nonsense." Madame walked swiftly away. "I'm the lady of the house. It was meant for me."

Ella watched her walk away, and contemplated running after her to reclaim her invitation. But rather than risk tearing it, Ella simply followed the woman at a distance, and watched where she went.

Madame entered her room and closed the door after her, so Ella couldn't see where she put the paper.

But Ella didn't care. She'd wished her wish, and the fact that the invitation had arrived the very next morning was enough to fuel her hope.

Everything might yet turn out all right. She had until Saturday to get the invitation back, but she needed to do several other things before then, too. The invitation wasn't going anywhere. It would wait.

Agatha and Bertha insisted on having new gowns for the ball. Since there were no new silks to be had anywhere, this meant repurposing old dresses, which normally wouldn't have been too much work, but Agatha and Bertha had grown.

Lounging about the house all day eating, both girls had

widened significantly. To disguise their fuller figures, they required even fuller skirts.

For Agatha, who was the larger of the two, Ella found a gown her own mother had worn while pregnant, and adjusted the size to fit Agatha's frame. Bertha was trickier to fit, since there were no other gowns large enough to encompass her. Finally, Ella struck upon the idea that they could take advantage of Bertha's short frame, borrow fabric from the bottom hem of a dress, and patch it back in around the waist.

Bertha wasn't happy about this. "It's got extra seams. I'm going to look odd!"

"I can drape an extra panel around the bust," Ella offered. "That will detract from the seam work while enhancing your figure."

Though Bertha continued to moan and complain, she seemed secretly pleased, especially when she learned all the extra sewing would keep Ella busy another day.

"When you're done helping the girls with their dresses, my wardrobe needs attention, too," Madame informed her.

"Yes, of course," Ella agreed. She hadn't any choice in the matter, and anyway, she'd hoped to come up with something to make a dress for herself. Bertha and Ella had cast off petticoats they didn't ever want to see again, but Ella had no silks to sew for herself.

She finished sewing for Agatha and Bertha on Friday afternoon, at which time the girls modeled their gowns for their mother. Ella had hoped to slip away then, but Madame De Bouchard demanded she stay.

Augusta circled the girls in their gowns, peering close with her pince-nez glasses held to her eyes, inspecting Ella's handiwork.

Ella got the distinct sense she'd been retained in the room in order to be present for Madame Augusta's every criticism. But Madame said nothing, only scowled and clucked her tongue, mostly at the added seams on the waist of Bertha's gown, and of course, those couldn't be helped.

"Very well," Madame announced finally, straightening.

"Girls, remove the dresses. Ella, hang everything smoothly, and then join me in my room for a consultation."

Ella did as she was told, wondering all the while what her consultation would entail. Usually Madame told her what to do. There was rarely any consulting to it. And it didn't seem likely the woman had developed respect for Ella's opinion. No, she was up to something, almost certainly.

Madame was standing before her wardrobe when Ella arrived.

"Madame Augusta?" Ella said, mostly to let the woman know she was there.

Madame didn't turn, and didn't acknowledge her other than to start talking. "I'll wear my black gown. It's the most flattering." She pulled a dress from the closet.

It was not black, but a peculiar shade of greenish brown, more brown than green, almost precisely the same color as fresh cattle droppings.

"What do you think of this one?" Madame asked.

Ella suspected this was the consultation she'd been summoned for. "That's a very fine silk," she offered, having nothing better to say about the gown, which had neither flattering cut nor added adornment to make up for its questionable color.

"Take it." Madame thrust it into her hands. "Try it on, then come back down to help me with my gown. You can alter that in your spare time. I suspect you may have need of it."

"Thank you, Madame Augusta." Ella hurried up the stairs and slipped into the dress, her fingers trembling.

What did it mean? Why was Madame giving her a dress? Would she be going to the ball after all?

She'd wished her wish. Things were supposed to get better. Was this the beginning?

But as Ella stood before the bent flat of metal that served as her mirror (nothing as fine as the polished bronze downstairs) she viewed her reflection and wanted to cry.

The green of the brown made her yellow hair look greenish. It turned her skin a sickly pallor as well, and the cut

was as unflattering as any garment could ever be.

She'd looked better in her armor.

Worst of all, the dress smelled of Madame—her perfume and her sweat.

"Ella!" Madame snapped from downstairs. "What is taking you so long, Child? We have work to do!"

Ella rushed down the stairs, where she was required to spin slowly for her step-mother, and to pretend to be happy with the dress, and say grateful things even though the dress was awful. Madame was wearing her black dress by then, and wanted it altered to fit the current style, which meant Ella had to stand close to her and pin everything very carefully, while Madame barked at her with her horrid breath in her face.

They'd only just finished with the pinning when the front door opened and a man burst inside.

Madame, who stood between Ella and the doorway, and therefore blocked most of Ella's view, greeted the newcomer.

"Thomas! You're finally home!"

Thomas? Ella looked past her stepmother and immediately recognized the man who'd left nearly three months before with her father and brother.

Her heart filled with a dizzying rush of hope. Her wish had worked after all! The men were finally home, and everything would be fine. Her father would tell Madame that Ella needed to have a proper ball gown, and somehow she'd explain everything to Henry so he'd understand.

"I am home," Thomas acknowledged. "Barely. We've had such an ordeal as you could not imagine."

"Oh?" Madame asked. "Did you get the carts through? Will we be wealthy again?"

Thomas shook his head. "Nothing made it through. Nothing. They're holding them still, and they've taken the other horses as well. Robert is dead and Bertie imprisoned. I only just made it out with my life."

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Oh." Madame clucked her tongue. "You're quite sure about that? Robert is dead?"

"Quite dead, Augusta. I saw the fatal blow inflicted before my own eyes. Horrible, horrible, the pain and the blood."

"I've been widowed again." Madame sighed, then laughed. "And I'm already wearing black. How timely."

Ella froze, unable to move, hardly able to think.

It had to be some kind of cruel trick. Her father could not be dead. Madame wasn't responding like a woman who'd just learned her husband had died.

Then again, Madame didn't love Robert. She'd only married him because…well, why *had* she married him? What was in it for her? Was it…because she liked the idea of living at Caprese with Ella as her servant?

But she'd had Ella as her servant before, and other handmaids besides.

"Ella, fetch us some tea," Madame instructed her. "Cousin Thomas and I will be in the parlor. He'll want something substantial to eat after his long journey. Find us some meat."

Madame went, pins and all, toward that room.

Ella retreated to the kitchen and prepared tea, her hands so used to the task she didn't have to think about what she was doing, which was good, because her thoughts were spinning.

Her father couldn't be dead. But Thomas said he was quite dead.

Thomas had to be lying.

Then again, she'd thought Madame was lying when she'd told her about her mother's death of a fever, but that hadn't been a lie at all. Not only was there a mound of earth marked by a stone in the church cemetery, but Ella's own feet had fit the glass slippers.

Her mother was certainly dead.

And likely, her father was, too.

That meant Caprese would fall to her brother. But if he was captured, he couldn't claim it. Could Madame claim Caprese?

Of course she could, or Thomas on her behalf.

Was that why Madame Augusta had married her father? Had she been plotting all along to take their estate?

Ella couldn't see how the woman could have predicted this turn of events. No one could have. But it had happened, and Madame didn't seem at all upset by it.

In fact, as Ella carried a tray of tea and crackers and cheese and sausages into the parlor, Madame seemed as happy as she'd ever been.

Ella placed the tray on the table, served both Madame and Thomas, and then asked, "Where is my brother imprisoned?"

Thomas had his teacup to his lips and didn't answer immediately, but Madame snapped at her, "Ella, Master Thomas has just had a long journey. Don't pester him with questions."

"He's in Devin," Thomas informed her bluntly. "In the dungeon of the old Roman fortress."

"And what is his crime?" Ella pressed.

"Illegal transport of goods. Our eastern neighbors have made it illegal to transport anything through their territory. Those who try are fined. If they persist, they are imprisoned."

"For how long?"

"Indefinitely." Thomas shrugged and sipped his tea.

"Political nonsense," Madame huffed, shooing Ella away. "Get on. Thomas left his horse at the fountain. Tend to the beast."

"Yes, Madame." Ella curtsied and took her leave. She found the horse out front. It wasn't one of their own Arabians, but some other animal Ella had never seen. She led it to the barn and removed the saddle and gear before brushing the animal down.

All the while, her thoughts were racing. She had to get her brother out of prison, and their horses back, as well. She would have liked to get their carts of goods so she could pay all the taxes and pay off Madame, but if Thomas was right and the

transport of goods was no longer legal, she would have no choice but to leave everything behind.

She wasn't happy about that, but what did it matter, after all? Everything else paled against the necessity of getting her brother back.

Bertie had to return, and not just because she couldn't stand the idea of her brother being locked away in prison. Everything else hinged on his safe return.

Inheritance laws were complicated, especially in unusual circumstances such as theirs. Widows tended to retain ownership rights, especially if they had a son. If the son was biologically the widow's and not yet of age, the property would fall to the mother as steward until the son came of age. But since Madame was only a recent addition to the family, and since Bertie would stand to inherit as soon as he came of age, they could make a case to get rid of Madame, but only if Bertie was there to claim the estate.

As long as Bertie remained imprisoned in Devin, Madame De Bouchard would control everything.

But how was Ella supposed to get her brother back? She'd have to succeed where her father and brother had failed, which meant she'd need some advantage they hadn't had. But what? She was a girl, and they were men. All she had were disadvantages.

And these new laws—they were nonsense. They were purposely meant to strangle the rest of Europe, and thus far, they'd done a fine job of it. As long as the laws were in place, King Henry and the kings of the nearby kingdoms would continue to lose esteem in the eyes of their people.

The laws needed to be changed. Ella didn't have the power to do that, but perhaps, if she could explain what she knew to Henry…

But no, he wouldn't listen to her. Madame De Bouchard had told him such terrible lies about her. If she went to him, he'd turn her over to the guards. He'd send her away and refuse to listen.

Ella pondered all this as the evening grew long. She

finished her chores and took Madame's black dress up to the attic, and sewed the alterations by candlelight.

"If I could just get Henry to listen to me long enough to explain everything to him, perhaps this time he could change his father's mind," Ella whispered to me as she sewed. "If nothing else, he could talk to some of the other kings and princes. He knows people. They'd listen to him—but how am I going to get him to listen to me?"

I'd been mulling over the same question, and had an idea.

"He's got to be polite at the ball, doesn't he?" I asked Ella.

"I suppose."

"He can't make a scene and send you away, not in front of everyone," I added.

Ella nodded. "If Augusta is right, the king is trying to earn back the people's approval. They're going to be on their best behavior."

I fluttered next to her face, excited. "If you could get to the ball and dance with him, you could explain everything. You could even tell him that Madame lied, and explain that you're noble after all."

"Perhaps. I could try, anyway. He has no reason to believe me, not since Madame painted me to be a dishonest child of many fanciful notions. But it's either that or ride off to Devin all by myself, and I can't see how that would end any better. The ball's tomorrow night. If I can get my invitation back, or find a way to forge one—I can picture it exactly, so maybe I could make one to look like it—somehow, I could get in and see Henry."

Ella stood in front of the mirror. She still wore the ugly brown dress, and sighed. "And if that doesn't work, I'll ride off to Devin by myself. And if I die there like my father, well, it can't be worse than playing servant to Madame De Bouchard for the rest of my life."

By this time she was weeping silent tears, which dripped from her cheeks unchecked. She cried mostly because her father was dead and her brother imprisoned, but also for the loss of their horses and probably Caprese as well.

And if I'm honest, I was crying, too. My god daughter had wished for happily ever after, and in spite of all my magic, I'd somehow given her the opposite.

It rained that night, but the morning dawned as clear and lovely as any day ever was. The summer day was warm, but the unbearably hot spell of a few weeks prior had broken.

Ella had finished Madame's alterations in the night, and started in on altering the brown dress for herself, though there was little she could do for the garment. She served breakfast in her usual plain cotton dress, and Madame shrieked at her.

"Where is the gown I gave you?"

"Upstairs. I started the alterations, but they aren't finished yet."

"Lazy, good-for-nothing Child! Finish them and put it on! I'm expecting a visitor today." She raised her cup almost to her lips, then paused. "*You're* expecting a visitor." Then she laughed in a way that made Ella think maybe she should ride off to Devin that very moment and skip the ball completely.

But going to the ball meant seeing Henry again. He might hate her—he might even refuse to listen to her—but she couldn't help wanting to see him, and there was the slight possibility that maybe, if he danced with her out of pure politeness, she could make him understand what was going on. He was a sensible man, and had seen through subterfuge before.

Ella went upstairs and finished altering the brown dress, which was still ugly, but it finally fit, at least. It wasn't quite a ball gown properly, but considering the silk embargo, there was a strong likelihood that other women would be wearing less-than-ball-worthy gowns.

And anyway, Ella had no other options. She went out to the stable to tend to the horses, since the pair would be needed to pull the carriage, and she'd have to ride Mirage once Madame and her daughters had left.

Ella was still brushing down the animals when Bertha came outside, panting and red-faced, calling for her.

"Yes?" Ella put down the brush when she heard her name,

and went outside to meet Bertha.

"You have a visitor!" The red-faced girl exclaimed. "Mother's been calling for you, and she is not happy!"

Ella hurried up to the house. She had a terrible feeling she wasn't going to like whoever this visitor was. Perhaps it was some legal registrar come to dispute the ownership of Caprese. That wasn't a conversation she wanted to have, but it was still better than the alternative. The only other likely candidate, based on what Madame Augusta had said weeks before, was Raedwald.

And in no way did Ella want to visit with Raedwald.

Madame was standing in the front foyer as Ella came through the house from the kitchen.

"Ah, Ella, there you are." Madame sounded unusually relieved to see her. "You've a guest in the parlor."

Since Ella had just come from the sunny outdoors, the parlor seemed even darker than it was as Ella stepped into the room. The parlor curtains were closed, as usual, and given the warmth of the day, no candles burned, nor was there any fire in the fireplace.

A man sat in their stiffest high-backed chair. He was turned to face the fireplace, empty though it was.

Having had proper etiquette drilled into her, and knowing Madame De Bouchard was scrutinizing her every move, Ella walked into the room, past the man in the chair, and stopped in the middle of the rug. She dropped into a curtsy even as she turned to face her visitor, so that she didn't quite see his face until she lifted her head to stand tall.

"So, we meet again," Raedwald said. He sounded unusually pleased to see her.

Ella looked instinctively to the door, thinking perhaps she ought to bolt away.

Einhard stood next to Madame De Bouchard, effectively blocking the main exit.

There was another door on the rear wall of the room that led to the kitchen via the back hallway. Ella glanced at that door next.

Uliad stood in that doorway next to Thomas.

She was trapped. Ella's heart rammed against her throat.

Raedwald chuckled.

She'd never seen him so pleased.

"She's just as I told you, Aunt Augusta," Raedwald called, talking about Ella as if she wasn't standing in front of him. "This is the girl from the Paris masquerade. I could have been here months ago, if you'd believed me."

"Yes. Yes, you're quite right," Madame De Bouchard agreed.

Ella had never before heard her step-mother admit to being wrong, though she'd had many opportunities to do so.

This did not bode well.

"I could have had her wedded and bedded by now," Raedwald chuckled again, looking Ella up and down as though she was a horse he wanted to buy. "But as it happens, the timing may now be even better. They're after Henry to find a wife. If I marry first, I'll win the people's approval. And if I marry the girl Henry loves, perhaps he'll challenge me to a duel." Raedwald laughed again.

He seemed to be in a jolly mood, except that he was scowling, and there was ice in his tone, a spear of pure hatred such as Ella had never heard before, not even from him. It pierced the air between them and held her silent.

Ella's head spun. She had to get away. The doors were blocked, and Raedwald's chair sat between her and the windows. She'd never get by him, let alone get past the curtains and open the panes in time to jump out.

Raedwald looked her up and down once more. "Little imp. She's rather on the scrawny side. Don't you feed her?" He sighed. "Not that it matters. I've never looked so forward to claiming my prize." He stood and took a step toward her, his hand open wide as he stretched out his arm to take hold of her.

Ella bolted to the fireplace.

Quick as a mouse, she ducked inside, scrambling up the familiar bricks and nearly slipping on her silk gown. In spite of that, she moved up beyond his reach before he even so much as

bent his frame low enough to peer up into the chimney.

When he did so, a dusting of soot, loosened by Ella's upward scramble, fell down into his eyes.

Raedwald roared in anger. "She's gone up the chimney! Up the chimney! After her! Someone get up there!" He bellowed as he wiped at his eyes.

Ella climbed higher, but she needn't have bothered. Neither of the Ulster brothers, nor Thomas, could fit in the narrow space, and Madame Augusta wasn't nearly strong enough to pull herself up, even if she had been willing to try (which she wasn't).

"Smoke her out," Thomas suggested, cackling.

"Yes indeed, smoke her out," Madame agreed.

Raedwald was less excited about the idea. "That girl is just stubborn enough to stay in that chimney and die of the smoke. I need her alive."

"Oh, I doubt she'd *die*. She'd more likely pass out and fall down, and then we could revive her," Madame argued.

Ella decided not to stick around to see which way the discussion went. She hoisted her skirts high out of her way, and climbed up through the chimney all the way to the roof.

From there, she had a limited number of options. The drop from the edge of the roof to the ground was a long one, and she was likely to be injured. If she turned an ankle or broke a leg, Raedwald would capture her and that would be the end. She couldn't risk that.

There were four chimneys total, and she knew them well from having cleaned them recently. She hurried across the roof to the chimney that led down to the fireplace in her brother's room, and lowered herself silently inside. His window opened to the great oak tree, whose branches extended near the house. They'd both of them used the oak tree as an exit when they'd wished to sneak out after their bedtime.

Ella did this now. She'd never been so glad about Madame's insistence on keeping the curtains closed—at least no one would see her escape. She dropped from the tree and ran for the barn.

Mirage was brushed, watered, and fed. Her saddle and gear were at the ready, since Ella had expected to leave in a hurry for the ball that evening. She saddled the horse quickly and exited through the rear door of the barn, which couldn't be seen from the house, and rode swiftly down through the pasture to the stream, which she followed toward the village.

Ella didn't go all the way to the village—she didn't dare let anyone see her for fear Madame or Raedwald or any of the others would ask around and learn which direction she'd gone. She went as far as the spot where the narrow spring-fed stream from their pasture joined another larger stream, where blackberry brambles enclosed the streambed in a thicket of thorns all around.

There she stopped. The water was cold against her lower legs, and had soaked through her awful brown gown, making it weigh heavily on her. All the rest of her was covered in soot. She looked down at her blackened arms and choked back a sob.

"I haven't got anything," she whispered to me. "I don't have any money with me, none at all. I've lost Caprese—there's no way I can go back there, not unless I can bring Bertie home to claim it. And even then, I'll have to do something to keep Raedwald away. What could ever keep him away?" She shivered, partly from the cold of the stream, and partly from the fear of what he may have been going to do to her.

Jerome had told her once, long before, of how Sigismund had come to work for Henry. The little boy had started out as Raedwald's page, but Raedwald was so unspeakably cruel to the boy, Henry had paid his cousin to let Sigi come work for him.

And Raedwald hadn't even had reason to hate Sigismund. No, she didn't doubt his cruelties to her would be worse.

Far worse.

"Where am I going to go?" Ella asked, looking around her at the thick woods beyond the blackberry thickets, which were impassible in that area, save for the streambed. "I haven't any living relatives. Gustav would help me, but he lives at Caprese, so that's no help. Sigi doesn't have a home. I suppose I could

try to stay with Jerome, but we were never close, and the way he babbles when he's drunk—which is every night—even if I told him to keep my presence a secret, he'd likely tell everyone, anyway. So that's no good."

Ella splashed over to a clump of thicket whose branches hung low with ripe, heavy fruit. She hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast, and that had been merely a few hurried bites between serving Madame and her daughters, and finishing her usual chores (gathering eggs, milking the cow and goats, feeding and the animals).

Now she plucked berries and munched them down, thinking out loud. "I'll have to travel to Devin all on my own. I've no choice but to free Bertie. I can't think how he must be suffering there. Perhaps I should have left already."

While Ella chattered to herself, I grew to the size of a bluebird and flew to a branch not far from her face.

I waited for her to stop talking a moment, then interjected. "You know why you haven't left already. You need to visit Henry first. This is a bigger job than you can do all on your own. He needs to know what's going on. He can help you."

"He hates me," Ella countered.

"Does he?" I challenged her. "You thought he'd hate you when he found out you were really a girl, but he didn't, did he? He's only ever loved you, and I don't think a few lies from Madame would change that."

"But she told him I'm a servant."

"And he sent an invitation to the ball to *you*, Lady Ella. Don't you think he knows what he's doing?"

"It was probably just the pages who wrote up the invitation. I'm sure they keep a list of all the nobility."

"If your name is on that list, then he knows you're noble!" I shouted, though even red-faced and screaming, my voice was not terribly loud, due to my small size. "Motley-minded malarkey! He'll know that foot-licking fustilarian has lied to him! He's a bright young man who can see beyond subterfuge far better than most—just look at the life he's lived, with his uncle and cousin always plotting to dethrone him or kill him.

Give him a bit more credit than that."

Ella swallowed a mouthful of berries and sniffled back her tears. "You are right. I know Henry is capable of seeing past the lies, but Fairy Godmother, don't you see? It doesn't matter. Every time I've let myself hope—that I could compete without being found out, that my father could do his job without being imprisoned or killed, that we'd get our carts and horses back—every time, that hope is dashed. And not just dashed. Obliterated. So what am I to hope for this time?"

"Hope that Henry listens to you! Hope that he can help you!"

"But he's already tried talking to his father. The king won't listen. And how am I supposed to see Henry? I can't go to the ball dressed like this. I'm a mess! I've got soot all through my hair and everywhere else. I haven't got my invitation. Supposing, just supposing I managed to sneak into the castle through the tunnel again, I don't know how to find the ballroom from the kitchen, and I'd be sure to be spotted long before I ever reached the prince. With my luck, Raedwald would find me first.

"No." She shook her head sternly and ate more berries. "I've got to do better than *hope*. I can't just hope and run headlong into trouble. I've got to plan. I've got to prepare. With my father dead and my brother imprisoned, I'm the last hope for my brother and the horses and all of Caprese. I can't waste the freedom I have now. I've got to use it—and use it wisely. Now, what advantages do I have? If I could get to Henry, I imagine he might listen to me—but there's the big *if* of getting to him."

I flew into the air, buzzing, excited. "The ball is *tonight*. Henry's supposed to meet every noble lady. If you can get in, you can meet with him!"

"Yes, that's a fabulous opportunity, but look at me!" Ella held her berry-stained hands out, and looked down at her sodden, soot-covered gown, which had been ugly before, and really wasn't much better for the soot.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Tatterdamlion troglodyte! You're standing in a stream! Take a bath!" I urged her.

"Oh, great. And then what?"

"We'll think of something. The ball doesn't start for, what, five more hours? We've got time."

"Not time enough to sew a dress." Ella peeled off the ugly gown and waded into the deeper water where the small stream joined the larger one. She unbraided her hair and did the best she could to wash it in the stream.

"I haven't even got a comb." Ella said as she ran her fingers through her hair.

"I could fly back to the house and bring you your comb."

Ella smiled for the first time in hours. "Could you bring me dry clothes, too? And dry shoes?"

"I'll bring whatever I can carry," I promised. "And I'll see if I can't learn what Raedwald's up to, too."

"Ah." Ella leaned back in the water, letting the stream's current run through her hair, so that it flowed like a golden river from her head. "You are too good to me, Fairy Godmother."

"I do try," I admitted. After warning her to stay safe, and inquiring whether there was anything else she wanted me to try to bring, I shrunk myself tiny as a twinkle and streaked away like a shooting star.

Back at Caprese, Raedwald was still roaring. They'd started a smoky fire in the parlor fireplace, only to conclude afterward that Ella wasn't in the chimney after all. The Ulster brothers were stomping around the house looking for her, shaking the bushes and calling for her to come out, which made me wonder if they were really that dull-witted, or if perhaps they weren't trying to warn her away.

Madame Augusta screamed for her daughters and told them to run down to the barn to check whether any of the

horses or saddles were missing. Agatha and Bertha screamed back at their mother that they needed to be getting ready for the ball, for it was almost midafternoon already, and Charmont was half a day's journey by carriage.

And there was no way the two of them were going to ride there on horseback.

But their mother would have none of their excuses, and insisted they run down to the barn at once. The girls first seemed scared of the idea, as though Ella might be lying in wait to inflict some violence upon them, but they finally decided their mother was more frightening even then Ella, so they went down to the barn to look, returning to report that they couldn't tell whether any horses or saddles were missing, since they weren't sure how many were supposed to be there.

All this activity would have been entertaining, and I was tempted to stay and watch more, but I had a job to do. After taking what I needed from around the house, I flew to the attic, where I grew to the size of a cat and assembled a bundle of the things Ella had requested. I flew them out the window, and was lugging them through the sky above the pasture when I spotted Gustav fishing at the stream.

It occurred to me that he could be of some help. He'd never liked Madame, and was wary of her tricks, which was largely why he spent so much time at the stream and not in the house.

I flew down and landed beside him, surprising him.

"Oh, what's this? Are you Ella's fairy godmother? I haven't seen you in some time. How did you get so big?"

"I grew. Are you aware of the commotion at the house?"

"Yes, yes." Gustav frowned. "Madame Augusta had me carry up an armload of firewood for the parlor, and there are men looking in the bushes for Ella, which makes no sense, because Ella knows better than to hide in the bushes this time of year, with all the mosquitos. Madame wouldn't tell me what the fuss was about, but with all their screeching, I decided it was a good time to go fishing."

"A very good time," I agreed. "I'll tell you what's happening. That man, that Raedwald of Nordheim—"

"Raedwald? He's really Richard the fourth."

"That he is," I acknowledged.

"I don't like him."

"Good. He's a terrible man. Madame Augusta tried to give Ella to him."

"What? Give Ella—how? As a servant?"

"As a bride, I think, technically, but I'm sure she'd end up being more like a servant. Anyway, none of that matters. Ella ran away up the chimney and down the tree, and rode off on Mirage before they even knew she was gone."

"Up the chimney! Now that makes more sense. I wondered why they'd need a fire. Our Ella's a smart girl."

"She is," I agreed, sensing stronger kinship with Gustav than I had experienced before. "But now she's homeless and penniless and doesn't know where to turn. If Raedwald catches up to her…well, we can't let that happen."

Gustav's face went pale behind its leathery exterior. "That we can't. He's as bad as they come."

"Indeed," I agreed, hurrying the conversation along, since I'd already taken longer than I'd meant to, and Ella might worry. "The point is, we might need your help. Bertie's imprisoned in Devin and Robert is dead."

"I'd heard that. Seems we ought to do something to free the boy."

"That's what Ella thinks, too. She's going to visit Prince Henry and see if he can do something to help. I don't know what's going to happen."

Gustav looked thoughtful. "I'll keep an eye on things here, and try to learn where that Raedwald's headed next. I'll have my things ready to leave on a moment's notice if you have need of me."

"Oh, thank you! Now, I must be going!"

I flew back to Ella, and found her still scrubbing at her hair in the creek. There was a dry rocky shelf that jutted out from under the blackberry thicket on one stretch of the stream bank. I left my bundle there and shrunk back to the size of a bird, then sat there, panting.

"You're back!" Ella sounded relieved to see me. "Is my hair clean? I can't see on top—did I get all the soot out?"

I flew over and inspected her. "You're as clean as can be. Come now, we've got to get you dressed. The ride to Charmont will take you at least an hour even at a full gallop—longer if you're going to avoid the main road, which would be wise, since it's the road Raedwald's most likely to take, and I expect him to attend the ball tonight."

Ella shuddered visibly. "Do you think it's wise for me to go, if he's going to be there?"

"Now, we've been over this already. You've got no choice but to go. We'll just have to keep you away from Raedwald. He won't bother you if you're with Henry." I waved off the rest of the discussion because really, there was every chance she would encounter Raedwald, and there wasn't a thing I could do to prevent it or guarantee otherwise. But I couldn't let her allow that to keep her from attending.

"Come on, then. Let's get you dressed and off to Charmont."

"But what am I to wear to the ball?" She'd placed the ugly brown dress on the berry thicket to dry. In addition to being still streaked with soot and berry juice, it now had several snags from the thorns.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Perhaps we can find a place for you to rent a dress."

"Charmont is not Paris," she reminded me. "And there's no time to sew anything to fit. Besides, with the blockade—"

"Yes, I know, I know, but come on, Girl! Quit your lackadaisical lollygagging! We've got to get going!"

With my encouragement, Ella got her hair all combed out and braided, and dressed in the simple cotton dress I'd brought her. She rolled up the still-damp brown gown, and packed it in her saddlebag.

The leather shoes she'd been wearing were still quite wet from the creek, but she frowned at the pair of shoes I'd brought. "Mother's glass slippers? Really? This seemed like the most practical choice for a ride into town?"

"You're going to a ball! They're the only appropriate thing you own," I insisted.

Ella shook her head, but still slipped her feet into the slippers. They molded perfectly around her soles, thanks to their magic. At least she wouldn't have to worry about them rubbing wrong and causing blisters.

Once she was ready, the next trick was finding a safe route to town. She couldn't follow the stream any further, because the water grew much too deep. The banks were likewise steep, and choked with thickets. Ella rode back upstream until she reached a spot where the thicket thinned enough for her to ride up the bank and into the woods.

"Which way from here?" she asked. "I don't dare go upstream much further, or I'll reach Caprese. Raedwald might yet be there."

"I'll fly above the trees and see if I can spot the road," I offered, and did so.

The usual road that led to Caprese was not far, but I could also see Caprese in the distance, and the Ulster brothers were readying the carriage for the women to ride into Charmont.

It didn't seem wise to send Ella that route.

In the other direction, the woods gave way to a pasture, and I could see beyond another road, which led in the general direction of Charmont.

When I flew down and reported to Ella what I'd seen, she agreed we should stay off the usual road. Instead we made our way to the path I'd spotted from the air. We followed it until it forked, and then I again rose up to the sky, searching for the best route.

In this way we made it to Charmont by evening time. With less than an hour to go before the ball was scheduled to begin, Ella skirted the main parts of the city, traveling instead to the river and past the tournament grounds, alongside several riverside gardens, to the grotto.

She reached the salty hot springs and dismounted. Evening light streamed down through the fissure in the ceiling, and the sounds of dripping water filled the cave.

But there was more than just the sound of water—the deep reverberation of distant voices echoed from somewhere.

Silently, Ella crept toward the opening of the tunnel that led to the dungeon, wine cellar, and stables. I flew above her, listening closely.

Sound moved down the tunnel as though through an echo chamber. Voices.

"How much wine are we going to need?"

"They've invited all the nobility. Plan on making this trip all night. They might well drink it all."

Ella met my eyes and gave me a resigned look and whispered, "They're going to be coming and going to the wine cellar all evening—and likely the kitchen will be a busy place, as well. That leaves only the dungeon."

"I don't think you should go up that tunnel at all. Who knows if the dungeon even connects to the castle any other way? I doubt it would, for safety. And if you got caught in there, anyone could lock you up. You'd be no use to your brother imprisoned here."

"What are we going to do, then? The ball starts in far less than an hour. I'd hoped to arrive early, before Raedwald arrives, so I can talk to Henry without Raedwald seeing me."

"Come on back up the path to the garden. I spotted a field of pumpkins."

"Pumpkins?" Ella asked, sounding confused, but following me anyway. "They wouldn't be ripe yet, not this time of summer."

"They don't need to be ripe for what I have in mind. The only question is, are you willing to use another of your two remaining wishes?"

"I already burned one for nothing, so what's one more?" Ella took hold of Mirage's bridle and led the horse back down the path toward the riverside gardens.

"Now Child, you don't really believe that wish was wasted, do you?"

"Am I living happily ever after?"

"You're going to go to the ball, aren't you?"

"Am I?" Ella asked.

"You can, but as I said, it's going to take a wish. That will leave you only one left, and once you've used all three, I disappear out of your life."

"That's right," Ella remembered aloud. "You're only with me until I've used my wishes. But weren't you with my mother always?"

"Almost. Did she never tell you how she used her three wishes? One was for the glass slippers. The second put out a fire that had gone out of control in the kitchen, and threatened to burn down the house. And the third was when you were being born.

"Your mother was older than most new mothers. I don't know if that was the problem or something else, but she was having a terrible time bringing you into this world. I thought we'd already lost her, and of course if we lost her, we'd likely lose you, as well. But I screamed in her ear that she needed to wish for you to both survive. She wished her wish, and I was gone until you were born. Then I was back again as your fairy godmother. So, no, I wasn't gone from her life for long."

"I never knew any of that." Ella confessed as we reached the garden. "But if wishes end at midnight, how is it she survived longer than that?"

"The magic ended at midnight. That's all," I reminded Ella. "Whatever was going on in her body that was draining her life away had to be stopped for her to live. By the time midnight came, she'd regained enough of her strength to continue on, all on her own."

"Did you know that would happen?"

"I had no idea. She might well have died at midnight. That was certainly a risk, and I held my breath when the clock chimed the hour. But what good would it have done her to save the wish? She couldn't use it dead. And we needed you safely birthed. That's what the wish really gave us. Surviving—she did that on her own." I looked around the garden and blinked, recalling that we had work to do.

"Now," I announced, breathless from my long story. "Let's

pick out the prettiest pumpkin."

"Does it have to be pretty?" Ella asked.

"I don't know, but it can't hurt. We're going to stretch the limits of my magic as it is, so if we can start with a pretty pumpkin, that's one bit less for me to do."

"And what are we doing with this pumpkin?" Ella lifted several gourds, inspecting each until she found one she liked. "We'll have to pay the farmer if we take it."

"Well now, Dear, you can pay the farmer back later. You know you can't sneak into the castle by the back way, so you're going to have to arrive like a real guest."

"Like a real guest?"

"Yes. So we'll need a pumpkin and— ragamuffin rodentia! Are those mice? Catch them! Catch them, Dear. We'll need as many as we can get."

Ella caught the mice and scooped them into her skirt, which she held like a basket. "I've got four," she announced once she'd captured them all.

"Only four?" I tutted softly. "A coach and four, that's good enough, two matched pair, but oh, we need a footman."

"A footman?" Ella asked.

But I'd already come up with an idea. "Mirage can do it!"

"Mirage can be a footman?"

"Yes, she'll do grandly."

"But Mirage is a female."

"She's also a horse, Dear. If my magic can overcome that, her being a girl won't be any obstacle at all," I assured her. Although, truth be told, I'd never changed a horse of any gender into a footman, so I spoke from conjecture and wishful thinking. "Now let's see, what else? We've got to get everything we need all at once, and we've got to do the wish just right."

"I've got to have an invitation," Ella reminded me, as she led Mirage and carried the pumpkin up a path that led from the nearest street through the garden.

"Ah, yes, that! We don't need magic for that. Look in your pocket, Dear."

Ella reached into her pocket and pulled out the invitation I'd swiped from Madame Augusta's bedroom during my visit back to the house to claim her dry clothes.

"You got it! Oh, but she's going to be angry."

"Not as angry as you might think." I shook my head. "She and her daughters had their own, as well. They are noble, too, you know."

In the distance, the castle clock chimed the seven o'clock hour.

"Are we all ready?" Ella asked, looking down at her simple cotton dress with its skirt full of mice.

"I think so. Let's see—mice into horses, pumpkin into a coach, horse into footman—"

"My dress for a ball gown."

"Yes. That. Oh! Sticks and snails and puppy dog tails! We need a driver!"

"A driver? Can't you just make one out of thin air?"

"I could, I suppose, but that would take a great deal more magic, and we might not have enough left for your dress. We can't risk that now, can we? Let me see what I can find," I told her, and flew off.

The riverside garden wasn't far from a row of houses, which probably belonged to the people who kept the gardens. I saw a few chickens first, but they're notoriously dim-witted, and would almost certainly try to eat the mice before we finished the wish. I spotted a dog next, which fortunately was not tied up in any way.

But how to get him into the garden? I flew close to his face, growing just large enough to capture his attention. The dog lifted his head, gave one sharp bark, and leapt after me.

I flew just ahead of him all the way to the garden.

"Catch him, Ella, Dear! Catch the dog!" I called as I flew past her.

"I don't want to lose my mice," Ella reminded me, but she crouched down and somehow managed to intercept the animal without losing the rodents in her skirt.

"Now wish it, Dear! Wish everything to be right to go to

the ball!"

"I wish," Ella said clearly, even as she restrained the dog, "for everything here to be what I need to go to the ball."

Chapter Twenty-Six

There was a great deal of swirling fairy dust then, and the dog howled, which turned into a manly groan as he became a well-dressed if slightly long-eared fellow. The mice swelled and popped from Ella's skirt into four white horses, as pretty as you please. Mirage's eyes grew wide with alarm, and she reared up on her hind legs before changing into a footman. The man shook his head, much as Mirage would have tossed her mane, and he stomped one foot in consternation.

The pumpkin was an odd thing. It was clear we'd been wise to select a pretty one, because all it did was swell up large enough to sit inside, with doors and wheels and a perch for everyone. It was pretty enough, but no matter which way you looked at it, it still looked like a pumpkin.

I was particularly pleased with how Ella's hair came out—an intricate wonder of braids and curls, swept high, with delicate tendrils cascading down to frame her face.

Ella's dress was the best of all. About the same moment the mice flew into horse form from her skirt, the skirt itself ballooned into a flouncy gown of silvery blue, almost the precise color of Ella's eyes, but with a bit more silver for effect. The floral jacquard bodice hugged her figure graciously, and the neckline swept low.

I tutted regretfully. "I didn't think to do anything for jewelry, and a jeweled necklace would have looked so fine."

But Ella twirled, admiring the skirt which fluttered almost like flower petals as she moved. "It's lovely. It's the loveliest dress I've ever seen."

"Flummoxing frippery! You should be on your way if you're going to find Henry before Raedwald arrives." I motioned to Mirage, the footman, who held open the door of the pumpkin coach.

Ella stepped inside.

To my relief, the inside of the coach was not moist with

seeds and pumpkin flesh, although it did smell faintly of pumpkin pie.

"Now remember—the magic ends at midnight, so you've got to be gone before then."

"Yes, of course. I'll remember. Thank you so much, Fairy Godmother!"

She had to call out the last little bit as the carriage rolled away. The horses, perhaps knowing that their driver was a dog, and feeling instinctively, as mice, that they ought to run away, seemed to be in a hurry to move.

They rolled up the street, and quickly found the line of other carriages headed to the castle.

I followed, of course, twinkling like a sparkle of leftover fairy dust high above the carriage. From there I could see the other guests lined up to arrive, and recognized the coach from Caprese just a few coaches behind Ella in the line.

Voices echoed up from the open windows.

"When are we going to get there, Mother?"

"The ball started at seven. It's past seven now. He's going to choose a bride before we even get there!"

"Can't this line move any faster? What's taking so long?"

"Don't touch my hair. Mother, she touched my hair!"

Curious to see who was driving their coach, and expecting it to be Gustav, who'd driven for them before, (Madame often drove, but only for informal shopping trips when she wished to leave Ella behind. She wouldn't dream of driving to the ball.), I was surprised to spot two very large figures seated as driver and footman.

Einhard and Uliad.

But where was Raedwald?

I flew low and looked inside the carriage, but it was clearly just Madame Augusta and her two daughters inside.

Had Raedwald stayed behind? That seemed unlikely. No, he'd almost certainly gone ahead on his own horse.

Which meant he'd already be at the ball.

I flew back to Ella and warned her, explaining all I'd seen.

"Yes," she agreed. "It had occurred to me that Raedwald

might be there already. I've got to hope he's concerned enough about public opinion that he won't make a scene, even if he recognizes me. But I am at least a little out of place, and he won't expect me to be dressed like this, so that should help."

"Indeed," I agreed. "You'll just have to stay alert for him, and turn the other way immediately if you see him. Don't let him get close enough to recognize you. I'll watch for him and let you know what he's wearing if I see him."

We were getting quite close to the castle by that time (we had started from nearby, so it wasn't a long trip). The carriages pulled up to the wide marble stairs in flocks of three, stopping to let out their passengers before driving on. There were some men in attendance, but the majority of the guests were young women.

Ladies in ball gowns streamed up the stairs, looking, from a distance, like so many flower petals blown by the wind.

Our carriage reached the steps and Mirage came around, opening the door just as a good footman should. Ella smiled at her horse-turned-footman as she disembarked.

The footman stamped and shook his head.

Ella giggled and headed up, following the women ahead of her.

From the bottom of the steps, we could not see what waited for us above. It wasn't until we were nearly to the top of the steps that we saw the receiving line waiting for us.

I suppose it only made sense, if King Henry was, indeed, trying to connect with his people and raise their opinion of him, that he'd take the time to greet them each as they arrived. He was flanked on either side by his daughters, his brother, and his nephew.

Henry was nowhere to be seen, but Raedwald—or Richard, as of course he would be known in this setting—stood last in the receiving line, looking deceptively handsome, though I thought his eyes still looked a bit red from the soot.

Ella contained her reaction when she saw the line. She blinked once and drew in a sharp breath, but her feet hardly faltered, and she soldiered forward.

What choice did she have?

A steward stood ahead of the line, taking each girl's invitation and checking it over, welcoming her, and passing the invitation to a herald, who cried out the name or names of each party as they arrived.

Ella handed her invitation to the steward, who inspected it only briefly before passing it along to the herald.

The herald called out in a strong voice, "Lady Ella of Caprese."

Richard turned his head, and I heard gasps echoing up from the stairs below.

Madame Augusta and her daughters had arrived.

Ella simply curtsied before the king as the others ahead of her had done. She bobbed likewise before the princesses, and hurried to curtsy before Richard the third and Richard the fourth.

As she'd predicted, there was little Richard could do at that moment, not with everyone watching, but his steely eyes never left her as she proceeded toward the ballroom.

The level where we stood was crowned with high-arched ceilings supported by rows of columns. Each column was topped by tiers of candles; their golden light reflected against the pale marble of the columns, and the polished pink quartz of the floor. Tables of food and drinks were nestled between these, and many ladies paused to look over the food offerings, which were presented on elaborately arranged platters, and in great sparkling vats.

Ella continued on in search of Henry. She had to find him before Richard found an excuse to step away from the receiving line.

Just past the tables was another wide staircase, this one leading downward.

She paused at the top and looked down. Couples swirled on the dance floor below, while a large orchestra filled a platform in the distance, music resounding against the marble walls, infusing the vast room with sweet melodies, and spilling over through the wide archways into the evening air.

Henry spotted her immediately, and came bounding up the stairs two at a time to greet her.

"I heard them call your name," he told her with a grin, taking her hand and bowing as she curtsied before him. "I'm so glad you were able to make it. You look—" he shook his head, at a loss for words. "So elegant. Do you care to dance?"

"Yes, please," Ella agreed as Henry led her down the stairs. "Keep me away from Richard."

"Has he been a problem already?"

"He paid a visit to Caprese this morning. I'm not entirely sure what his intentions were, but he said something about having me wedded and bedded, and that he hoped you'd challenge him to a duel."

Henry's eyes went wide, and then his jaw hardened. "So that's why he was missing most of the day, and was in such a jolly mood at breakfast."

They reached the dance floor, and Henry held out his hands, drawing her into position. They began to dance, as easily and familiarly as though they'd danced together all their lives, and not just that one evening in Paris.

Ella had so much to tell Henry, she couldn't wait for him to elaborate on Richard's odd behavior. "My step-mother may have told you I'm a servant, but she was lying."

"I know," Henry assured her. "Did she tell you of my visit?"

"Only after I found my helmet among her things."

"I didn't know how else to reach you," Henry admitted. "She refused to let me in, and wasn't even sure you were anywhere around, and I had to get back to Charmont for a meeting that evening. But I stopped in your village on my way home, and checked the records at the church. Your father and mother are Robert, and the late Eleanor, of Caprese."

"Yes."

"Your father married Madame Augusta De Bouchard after your mother died. Do you know where Madame Augusta hailed from before she married Master De Bouchard?"

"It was somewhere near Paris, I believe."

"Nordheim."

"Nordheim? As in, Raedwald of Nordheim?"

"Richard took the name from his mother's side. His mother and Augusta are sisters."

"That's why he called her Aunt Augusta," Ella realized aloud as the song changed and they seamlessly began another dance.

Ella remembered that she had far more important things to discuss than Richard's relatives. "I need your help. My brother Bertie has been imprisoned in Devin, in the dungeon of the old Roman fortress there."

Pain flashed in Henry's eyes. "Devin? On what charges?"

"Illegal importation of goods. They've made it illegal for merchants to pass through their country, and they're imprisoning those who attempt to do so. My father and brother tried to retrieve the carts of goods that had been impounded, but they were stopped, and Bertie imprisoned."

"And your father?" Henry asked, his face pale in expectation.

"I'm told he was killed," Ella admitted, trying to keep her emotions contained, though her lower jaw trembled, and her voice cracked. Somehow she kept her feet moving in time with the song.

Henry closed his eyes for a moment. Regret and sorrow passed visibly over his features. "I'm sorry. So sorry. If I'd had my way, those laws would have been stopped before they ever took effect."

"I know you're on my side. That's why I came here tonight, to talk to you. I intend to do whatever I can to free my brother from that prison. I will go there personally—"

"Ella, you can't. It's far too dangerous."

"My brother is there. He's been there for days and days, maybe even weeks. I can't leave him there."

"I agree, but listen—this is important. I learned something. After I spoke with you that day in my father's office, I looked into what you'd said about the taxes. They haven't been raised at all, and our tax offices haven't gotten any increased funds."

"But we paid more—"

"I know you did, and so has everyone else. It's not coming from this level, though. The local tax offices were told the rate had doubled, and they collected those monies. But the funds were intercepted, and only the true amount was paid to the government. The rest was diverted to a separate fund."

"Where's it going?"

"I don't know. That's what I've been trying to find out, but I've got to be very careful, because I suspect Richard is behind it all, though of course he's covered his tracks and hid everything that might connect him to it."

"Richard," Ella repeated, shuddering. "What's he doing with it?"

"So far, nothing. It's an enormous amount, equal to our entire annual budget, nearly. It's enough to fund a war—a big war. That's the only thing I can think he might be up to."

"That's so odd," Ella mused, focusing for a moment on her feet as the music changed again, this time to a slower tune.

"What is? That my uncle might want to start a war?"

"No, it's something Bertie said before they left to attempt to get our horses and carts of goods back. He said 'Trade routes equal power. Those who control the trade routes have power.'"

"Control them? They're trying to shut them down. By law, they're not trade routes anymore, just roads for travelers, not goods."

"Yes, but think about the lands we're talking about. Devin, where my brother is imprisoned. That city has changed hands countless times over the years. It's hotly contested territory. When I was a little girl traveling with my father, the city was European, and the rulers encouraged trade to Europe, partly because it was good for their economy, but also because they liked us."

"And they no longer like us?"

"They may no longer have a choice. It's like a game we used to play at the junior tournaments when I was a kid. Tug-o-war. Do you know it?"

"The game with the rope, and two teams each trying to pull

the other in their direction?"

"And when you topple the other side across the center line, onto your side, you win."

"So you think Devin wants to topple us?"

"No, Devin is the rope. The Saracens want to topple us, and they're using Devin and the trade routes to pull us over."

"That makes sense. That makes far too much sense. Why didn't I see it sooner?"

"Because you've been trying to solve the riddle from this end, and it looks like a completely different problem from here," Ella admitted. "This bit with your uncle embezzling enough money to fund a war…what do you suppose he's up to?"

The song changed again, and the pair danced to the faster music. Henry suggested, "It could be that he's realized what the Saracens are plotting, and he wants to come out as the hero, so he's preparing to fund a war in our defense."

"But why lie to your father about how bad the trade problems are, then? Why not work with him?"

"He wants to make my father look like an inept ruler, so the people will want to crown him instead."

"But your father commands the military. Have these diverted funds gone to the military?"

"No. I'd have seen them on the reports if they had. They're nowhere to be found."

"Then I doubt his war is meant to defend us."

"But you do agree he wants to start a war?"

"Yes. But who will be fighting whom?" Ella bit her lip thoughtfully, then shook her head. "I don't believe he's fighting on the side of Charmont."

Henry looked thoughtful. "I don't know. But do you know what I have concluded? I'm not going to learn anything more by wasting my time at tournaments or sitting around here at the castle. I need to go to Devin myself."

"But your father forbade it."

Henry gave her a tight-lipped smile that suggested he was plotting something. "My father has insisted for some time that I

ought to take seriously the task of seeking a bride. Of late, his concerns over the things he can't control have spilled over into trying to control what little he can—namely, me. He'd suggested this ball two years ago, when I turned eighteen. I told him *no* then and ever since. But seeing that I wanted something very badly—to travel east and sort out the trade embargo issues; and he wants something badly—for me to choose a bride, I realized we could both get what we wanted if we were willing to make a deal."

Somewhere in the midst of Henry's speech, the music had changed again, and Ella had a difficult time getting her feet to follow the rhythm. The task was made all the more difficult because she suddenly found herself breathing rapidly, with her heart fluttering inside her like a hummingbird's wings, and her thoughts clamoring with opposing points of possibility and disbelief.

"What are you saying?" Ella whispered.

"I realize you didn't arrive until after the herald had announced the terms of the dance. I am free to dance with any eligible lady I care to. If I dance with a woman once or twice, it means nothing. If I dance three dances, it indicates that I am particularly interested in that lady. And if I dance with a woman for five dances, it means I have chosen the woman I wish to make my bride."

As Henry explained this, Ella tried to recall just how many times the music had changed.

Her thoughts were a blur. "Which dance are we on?" she asked.

"When this song is over, we will have completed five dances." Henry studied her face as he spoke. "I love you. No other woman I've ever met can compare with you. There is no greater happiness I could ever imagine than to have you by my side always. Will you be my bride?"

The music stopped.

It seemed the entire orchestra had realized what was at stake, and had been keeping track of Henry and Ella's dances. They did not play another song. The entire room seemed to

hold its breath.

Ella's first instinct was to agree, but her throat had gone dry, and she still felt breathless, which gave her pause. It was during that pause that she realized that Henry had done a very wise thing by holding what he wanted up against what his father wanted, to make a deal that would ensure they both got what they wanted.

"If," she started, forcing her voice to work in spite of her racing heart and shaky throat. "If we can free my brother. I don't even care about the carts of goods, though I'd like those home, too, if we can. And the horses. If they're alive, I want to bring back our horses. But my brother. If we can free him, I will marry you."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Henry smiled hesitantly. "I was hoping for a more enthusiastic answer."

"I cannot live in a palace while my brother is chained in a prison. I love you, Henry. I always have, but those are my terms. If you'd like, you may discuss them with your father." Ella gave him a pointed look.

Henry raised an eyebrow of realization, and then smiled a conspiratorial smile. "Indeed, we should bring your terms to my father. Seeing that he is eager to see me wed, and in consideration of the fact that you are the only girl I could ever marry, it's only sensible that he should approve me to travel in order to meet your terms."

Ella smiled back, delighted that Henry had understood her point, and had not bristled at her demands.

"Now," Henry continued, his eyes darting to the crowd all around them, who stood motionless, as though waiting for some signal from the couple, "before we leave the dance floor, it would be in good taste for us to…" he hesitated, searching for the right word.

"Why don't you kiss me?" Ella suggested.

"You wouldn't mind? I thought perhaps our last kiss was rather abrupt, and I feared I hadn't asked properly."

"Oh, I liked it very much."

Henry did not need any further encouragement. He still had one hand at Ella's waist. With the other, he ran one finger along the curve of her chin. This was necessary for him to find her lips, since he closed his eyes and went forward entirely by feel.

Ella had wondered, since their first kiss, if it was as marvelous as she remembered, or if, perhaps, her memory of it was influenced by her feelings for Henry. This time, however, she tried to be more objective. Still, she found the kiss to be entirely delightful, so that when Henry pulled away, she wished

he wouldn't.

"Let's talk to my father," Henry said.

That brought Ella back to the matter at hand. She couldn't stand around kissing Henry at the ball all night. She had a brother to save.

As Henry took Ella's hand, a cheer went up from the crowd all around them. For the first time, Ella looked at those who were assembled, watching them. She did not recognized many people, although she saw Raedwald, who was not cheering, but neither did he look particularly upset.

If anything, he appeared the slightest bit pleased, as though something had gone his way.

Ella couldn't think Raedwald would find anything satisfying about the kiss she'd shared with Henry, unless he had some alternate plan whose pieces had just fallen into place.

She made a note to mention what she'd seen to Henry.

There wasn't time to bring it up just then. They crossed the floor directly to the king, who was beaming at them as they approached. He seemed entirely satisfied with his son's choice.

Ella curtsied low before King Henry, who then took her hand and kissed it.

"Lady Ella of Caprese, is it?" King Henry asked. He'd either been paying very close attention, or, more likely, he'd assigned people to keep track of all the guests and inform him of names whenever one became relevant. Either way, it saved his guests from the trouble of introducing themselves while standing, awed, before the king.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Ella curtsied again, not quite as dramatically this time.

"Lovely, lovely girl," King Henry said in an approving tone, to no one in particular.

"Yes, she is, Father," Henry agreed. "Far lovelier even than her features, is her heart, which is steadfast in support of our crown."

"That's good. She's agreed to marry you, then, hasn't she?"

Henry opened his mouth, but seemed stuck on exactly what

to say.

Ella spoke for him. "On one condition."

"One condition?" The king was taken quite aback. It clearly had not occurred to him that any woman, especially one who was only noble, and not royal, would have any reservations about taking his son for a husband.

"Yes, Father," Henry acknowledged. "Perhaps we should step into another room?"

"Perhaps we should," the king agreed.

King Henry led the way to a nearby room. Several guards flanked him, two on either side, with more trailing behind. They shooed the guests from the room and closed the doors, standing guard outside while the king and prince and Ella spoke in privacy inside.

"What is this about conditions?" The king asked once the doors were finally closed, and they could not be overheard. "What do you want? A payment? Power? Title? What is it? If you marry him, you'll be a princess first, and then Queen, with all the power and money that goes with it. There's not much more to ask for than that."

"It's not anything like that," Henry assured his father. "She wants her brother freed."

The king looked confused. "My dungeons are empty."

Ella rushed to explain. "He's being held in the dungeon of the old Roman fortress at Devin, on charges of illegal importation of goods. He is a merchant. His carts have been impounded, his horses confiscated and possibly killed—"

King Henry scowled. "Devin. Every time I hear news out of Devin, it is worse."

Prince Henry added, "If we could free Ella's brother and bring his carts of goods back to Charmont, the city would celebrate the return of silks and spices to the markets."

"Your brother's carts are full of silks and spices?" the king clarified.

"They were at the time they were confiscated," Ella assured him. "Considering what I've heard of the number of carts impounded, I doubt anyone at Devin has had time to

empty them."

"Devin is not that far," the king mused. "It's on the Danube. You could sail there in ten days—less than that if we set men to the oars."

"Assuming the river is navigable for its entire course," Ella noted. "It's early July now. The river often becomes too shallow for ships by mid-July or August."

The king looked at her open-mouthed for a moment. "And how would you know that?"

"My father was a merchant. I traveled with him extensively from the age of nine. I've sailed the Danube and visited Devin. The fortress itself is daunting—situated on cliffs over a furlong high overlooking the river, with the Carpathian Mountains to the east. The castle is nearly impregnable."

"Yes," the king agreed, his tone both stunned and musing. "Indeed. Devin is nearly impossible to attack, even with an army ten times the size of mine, which is largely why, in spite of the problems we've faced with the trade embargo, I've chosen to approach the city only with delegations, and never with arms. But perhaps," the king strummed his fingers on a tabletop thoughtfully, "perhaps the time has come."

Prince Henry grinned. "We've had rain of late, and last winter gave us heavy snows. The white caps are still melting from the mountains. If we hurry, the Danube will get us there, which will save us time and save our horses."

"I'm less concerned about getting my men there, and more concerned about getting them home again." King Henry scowled. "That's the problem Lady Ella's brother encountered, isn't it?"

Both Henry and Ella nodded.

The king continued. "Now, who do we have who can identify this brother of yours—what's his name?"

"Robert. He goes by Bertie."

"Bertie of Caprese." The king nodded sharply. "All right then, who can identify him? I'm not sending in a team to pull a man from prison only to have them come back with the wrong man."

Ella looked at Henry. She had her mouth open, ready to speak, but she wasn't sure what she should say.

"I have met him," Henry said.

"Met him?" King Henry's eyes narrowed. "Do you know him well enough to recognize him, half-starved and dirty, in the dark hole of a dungeon? You realize you can't just go in there and ask around, 'who's Bertie?' Every man in that hole will claim to be him if they think there's any chance you might spring them free."

Ella paused. She wanted to go, of course, but she was certain the king would never approve—he'd more likely cancel the entire plan if she pushed too far. And anyway, she didn't need his permission. She was fully prepared to secretly slip onto a ship without anyone knowing there was a woman among them.

But that still left the need for a man to identify Bertie.

"Gustav Adessi has been Bertie's tutor for over seven years. He's traveled with him extensively. He can identify him."

"Gustav Adessi, the famous swordsman?" King Henry clarified.

Ella nodded.

"I—I tried to hire him to teach my son," the king sputtered. "But he was off traveling with some—oh! B-but—Gustav Adessi must be eighty years old by now."

"Quite nearly," Ella admitted. "But he's as spry as ever, and I don't doubt he'd insist on going if he knew a trip was being planned. He was beyond upset to hear of my brother's imprisonment. He's staying with us at Caprese. You can reach him there."

"All right then, fine," the king agreed. "Sailing down the Danube won't tax him much, I don't suppose. We'll need to have him fetched from Caprese, and I agree, the ships must sail posthaste. Let's get this planned tonight. I'll call in my military advisors—"

"But not Uncle Richard, nor Cousin Richard, either," Prince Henry insisted.

The king paused and looked his son up and down. "You still don't trust them?"

"I could offer you a thousand proofs to their lack of allegiance, but we've got more important matters to discuss. Perhaps you could just trust me."

"Fine." King Henry pinched his lips together. "I can pull off a military exercise without my brother's knowledge. Now, why don't the two of you get back to the dance—"

"I need to be part of this discussion, Father."

"The ball is more important. It's being thrown in your honor."

"The entire purpose of the ball was so that I might find a bride. I've found her." Henry beamed at Ella for a long moment, then continued, "But she won't be my bride unless we rescue her brother."

"I'm having him rescued, I assure you."

"*I* intend to oversee his rescue."

The king grew visibly flustered. "Whatever do you mean? I can plan the rescue as well as anyone. You needn't bother about it."

"I am going on the ships to Devin."

"Don't be silly," the king protested, though he didn't sound sincerely surprised. "This is a dangerous mission. I'm not going to put you in harm's way."

"The mission is not that dangerous, and I promise to take every precaution to secure my own safety. Frankly, I shall be safer cruising down the Danube than I am at tournament."

King Henry scowled, but in his kingly wisdom, he seemed to realize he could not support an argument against his son's claims. "I'd prefer you not go."

"You'd also prefer me to marry." Henry let his words settle upon their own weight.

The king frowned. "Fine. You may go. But let's get this planned so we can have you there and back. I'll call for my military advisors—"

The prince named off those men who he trusted to advise them without reporting anything to Richard. It was a small

group that assembled around the table. Maps were brought in, as well as food and drink.

Ella hovered quietly in the background, but did not draw any attention to herself for fear they might try to dismiss her. Once or twice, when the others seemed at a loss for a solution to various aspects of their plan, Ella murmured a suggestion to the prince, and he proposed it. These were universally well-received, and seemed to raise Henry's esteem somewhat in the eyes of the men—which was key for the prince, because the seasoned knights looked upon young Henry as though he were still a child.

As she hovered, Ella snacked on the sumptuous foods that had been brought in, which was the first thing she'd had to eat since the berries along the stream. She circled round the others, noting their plans, and paid especial attention to the maps on the table. None of those for the region of Devin or further downstream parts of the Danube showed much detail. She had maps at home that showed more roads, streams, and bridges.

The plan was made to set sail on the Danube first thing in the morning in three days' time, which was the earliest they could feasibly reach port from Charmont. They needed to leave as soon as possible in order to make the most of the recent rains, and avoid the shallower waters of the dry later summer season, which might run the ships aground. Plans were established for talking with the officials at Devin, and urging them to release select prisoners. Failing that, the men discussed their options for breaking Bertie out of the dungeon.

It was known that old Roman fortresses were equipped with iron shackles, which fit to one of only a very few styles of keys. One of the men who had knowledge of these types of keys was given the task of acquiring as many keys as he could bring, that they would be prepared to unlock the shackles that held Bertie.

Another notable impediment was the sheer cliff upon which the fortress was built. There were roads accessible from some distance, but those would doubtless be guarded. The cliffs were themselves considered the most secure feature of the

fortress, and as such, historically were only guarded at the top, near the entrance to the fortress.

The cliffs seemed insurmountable, but some of the military advisors insisted strong men equipped with longbows could shoot an arrow much further than a furlong, and with a crossbow, could shoot a full furlong and a half. They suggested archers could shoot ropes to the top of the cliff, and then soldiers could climb up.

This gave rise to a lengthy discussion about how the ropes would reduce the distance the arrows could be shot, and whether severely barbed arrowheads would hold better in the rock, and whether horizontal shooting distances were at all comparable to vertical, and whether, as some maintained, it wouldn't be far simpler and safer to go around via the steep hills to either side of the cliffs, and take their chances with the guards.

The military advisors talked for hours, until a page stepped in and murmured something to the king, who looked startled and took Henry aside.

"It's nearly midnight, and you've been away from the ball nearly all the night. Do take Lady Ella out there and dance a bit more."

Seeing that the bulk of the planning had already been accomplished, Henry agreed readily.

Ella hurried to join him. "How close to midnight is it?" she asked, startled to learn that the evening had passed so quickly.

"Eight minutes to the hour," Henry offered, pointing to a hall clock just ahead of them.

Ella noted the time, and hoped she could make a quick exit once they'd finished a dance or two. "Let's do hurry to dance for the people," she urged.

They took to the floor as the orchestra finished a song. There was a great murmur through the crowd, but before the orchestra began to play, a trumpeter blew a long formal blast, and a herald stepped forward.

"Prince Henry of Charmont has made his choice. Lady Ella of Caprese has agreed to be his bride!"

A great cheer went up from the crowd.

Ella blushed a furious red. She'd had no idea there was going to be an announcement made, and she wished the orchestra would get playing so she could finish her dance before her ball gown turned back into a stained and tattered cotton dress.

Thankfully, after only a moment's further awkwardness, the first strains of music began, and Henry swept Ella into a dance.

Henry had seen Ella blush, and rushed to apologize. "I didn't realize there was going to be an announcement, or I'd have warned you."

"I didn't mind," she assured him. "I just didn't know what I was supposed to do—if I should wave or curtsy or—"

"Just smile, that's all. You did perfectly."

Ella beamed back at him. They danced so well together, Ella hardly had to think about the steps. She simply let the music and Henry's steady hand guide her as she resolved to enjoy her last few minutes of the ball.

A mellow gonging sound carried over the music.

"What's that?" Ella asked, recognizing the sound of the castle clock striking midnight, though according to the clock they'd passed in the hall, it shouldn't have sounded for another few minutes.

"The clock striking midnight." The sound came again as Henry spoke.

"Already? The hall clock—"

"It tends to run a bit slow."

Ella froze for one terrified half-second, but the third gong sent her moving. "I've got to go," she called over her shoulder as she fled quickly toward the stairs.

The crowd didn't seem to know what to make of her sudden movement. The first people she encountered looked so stunned, they simply stepped back out of her way, letting her through. But by the time Ella reached the hall above, a fourth gong had sounded, and Raedwald and his father had moved to block the hallway, along with several guards.

Ella instantly realized she'd never make it out the front way, not with the guards blocking her path.

But she had to go somewhere. Henry had gotten over his momentary surprise and, with the clock striking a fifth time, he took the stairs two at a time after her.

Ella spun on her heel.

Now, I don't really understand what happened just then. Perhaps it was the magic going soft in those last breaths just before midnight. Or perhaps glass slippers obey their own rules, which are different from those of the rest of the world. Whatever it was, one of the glass slippers, which had fit Ella perfectly up to that moment, suddenly slipped loose from her foot, so that as she hurried to make her escape, it stayed behind as the clock struck again.

She realized her foot was bare one step later, but didn't even take the time to look back. Instead she darted down a hallway, having little idea where she was headed. She'd have happily rushed down the stairs, but those that led downward were off to one side and were blocked by waiters bringing more food up from the kitchen, and the clock struck again as she ran past them.

Ahead of her were only stairs going up, which were guarded by a pair of startled men who appeared to have been half-asleep on their feet moments before, and now found themselves suddenly approached by a frantic-looking young woman in a ball gown as the clock struck an eighth time.

"Excuse me," Ella called as she approached, and hoped they'd step out of her way.

Perhaps it was the prince running after her, calling to her to wait (he'd paused just long enough to scoop up her glass slipper, or he'd likely have caught up to her already), or maybe it was the throng of guards flocking behind the prince, or just as likely the guards were under orders not to let any guests through, no matter how lovely. Whatever their reasons, as the clock struck its ninth gong, the two guards crossed their lances, barring her way.

No doubt they did not expect much resistance from the

delicate-looking dance guest. Whatever the case, when Ella swept her forearms wide in front of her, she pushed aside the lances. The guard on her right was easily overpowered and stumbled backward, unsteady on his feet, but the one on her left pushed back, so that she had to sweep his feet out from under him in order to get past.

Ella charged up the stairs. In the time it took for the pair of guards to recover, she'd made the first turn and mounted the second half of the flight of stairs as the clock struck a tenth time.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

As Ella neared the top of the flight of stairs, in spite of the darkness of the unlit second floor, she saw ahead of her a familiar sight.

The throne room.

Of course it would not be too far from the ballroom.

Ella sprinted as the clock struck again. She ran, not toward the throne room itself, but toward the little door that led to the stairs to the kitchen.

The guards who stood before the empty throne room must have assumed she was going to attempt to pass them to reach the throne room, because instead of running toward her, they crossed their lances to bar her entry.

The twelfth gong struck as Ella ducked through the little door, and I flew along behind her as she ran down the steps. Her gown dissolved into the ratty old cotton dress, and her hair flew back into its old simple braid sitting in a single swirl atop her head.

She reached the kitchen and peeked out the door. Distant voices echoed through the room.

"Who's running away?"

"The lady the prince picked as a bride."

"She's running away with him?"

"No, she's running *from* him."

"Why would anyone want to do that? He's the nicest royal I ever met."

The voices seemed to carry from further and further away, so that the last bit wasn't even clear enough to hear for certain. No doubt the excitement of Ella's unexpected flight had traveled through the entire castle, and everyone had gone to see what was happening.

With no one left in the kitchen to spot her, Ella ducked through to the door to the tunnel, and hurried to the first fork in the path.

There she paused, panting, and debated which way she should go.

Her coach would be a pumpkin by that time, and the horses, mice, and the driver would have turned back into a dog. She didn't care to ever see the mice or pumpkin again, and the dog could undoubtedly find its way home with little trouble.

But Mirage would no longer be a footman. Mirage would be a horse, and Ella would not leave her dear mare alone and confused at the castle.

Ella followed the branch of tunnel that led to the stables. She ducked her head around the opening and peered into the space beyond.

The stables were a bustling hive of activity. Voices were shouting and it took only a moment for us to gather that guards were being dispatched on horseback to search for the missing girl, though no one knew where to look for her.

Ella ducked back into the tunnel, out of sight. "Fairy Godmother, do you think you can find Mirage?"

"If she's anywhere near here, I can find her. You stay out of sight." I flew off in search of the horse, who I found looking quite confused next to a dog and a pumpkin, among a vast row of chariots.

"Mirage." I grew just large enough to be heard when I flew inside her ear. "Follow me."

The horse was just stunned enough not to question my command. I flew ahead of her and she followed me to the back of the stables. The dog, probably for want of some better plan, followed us.

Ella peeked out and saw us coming. She'd wrapped a cloth over her head and tied it under her chin, so that it covered most of her face. When she saw us coming, she ran over, and took hold of Mirage's bridle. She led the mare out of the barn, keeping well-hidden in the horse's shadow.

Only one person asked what she was doing, and she told him she was fetching her master's horse. The man didn't seem to care much, and let her go, though he shook his head when he saw the dog following.

Ella didn't know where to go. It didn't seem wise to retreat to Caprese, since that was the most likely place for anyone to look for her. Besides that, she was exhausted.

She guided Mirage along a side-street. The dog had continued to follow them, but now began to howl.

Ella paused, and realized the dog that had driven her coach wasn't the only canine howling.

Several other dogs in the immediate vicinity were howling. It reminded her of how the dogs would howl when Jerome sang in his drunken stupors.

She heard it then, the sound almost buried by the noise of howling dogs.

Jerome. Singing.

With my help she followed the sound, and caught up to Jerome as he stumbled home. He wasn't moving very quickly. Obviously the king's good wine had flowed freely, and Jerome had taken advantage of its abundance.

Ella followed slowly behind Jerome (who did not notice her or the howling dogs) until he came to the rear door of a house. At this, Ella hurried to catch up to Jerome before he got through the door.

"Jerome!" she called in Allard's voice, keeping mostly hidden behind Mirage so Jerome wouldn't see her skirt.

"Allard?" Jerome broke off from his singing and looked around, disoriented.

"Yes, it's me. I'm in town for the ball and I won't make it home tonight. Have you got a floor I can sleep on?"

"I've got a hammock." Jerome grinned. "Come on in. Haven't seen you in a while."

"It's good to see you, too." Ella answered in Allard's voice.

Since Jerome held the door open, she had no choice but to step away from her horse. "Thanks so much, I do appreciate it. Quite a long way home from here." She added as she stepped inside past him, leaving Mirage next to a patch of grass, where the cistern held more than enough water to keep her through the night.

Jerome looked down, blinked, reeled, and closed the door

after them both. "Say, Allard, are you wearing a dress?"

Ella chuckled in her most masculine way. "A dress? My, my, Jerome, that is some choice wine they serve at the king's castle. Has it got you seeing double?"

Jerome blinked again and shook his head. "Must be." He rubbed his eyes. "There's the hammock, there. I'll let you string it, because I'm still seeing you wearing a skirt, with your hair tied in a scarf like a grandmother. And only one shoe. It looks as though it's made of glass. I need my sleep." Those last words were sung to a familiar tune, which Jerome had often sung before. He took up his song and stumbled into the next room, leaving Ella to fumble with the hammock strings.

She found the hooks on the wall and strung the hammock, then fell into it, exhausted.

At first she thought she might be too excited, and the bed too unfamiliar to allow her to sleep. But the long days and short nights, as well as her exhausting journey and the late hour, sent her fast to sleep before she'd hardly so much as closed her eyes.

She awoke the next morning while Jerome was still snoring away. Mirage still stood waiting patiently for her outside, and Ella crept off with the mare along back roads, and made her way out of the city.

The main roads were sure to be busy the morning after the ball, and many of the travelers would be guests who'd watched her dancing with the prince, so that anyone might recognize her, headscarf or not. Ella essentially retraced in reverse her journey from the day before, which led her to the creek and blackberries, so that at least she had something to eat. It was also cooler along the creek bed than on the dusty road, which offered welcome relief from a day that promised to be hotter than most.

In this way, she came by midmorning to the stream at the bottom of the pasture at Caprese, and was delighted to find Gustav sitting in a shady spot on the bank, fishing. He saw her approaching, and planted the handle of his fishing pole in the open knot of a fallen tree, before running to meet her.

Ella embraced him as though it had not only been a day since she'd seen him last.

"They're looking for you!" Gustav said, his face bright with excitement. "Men from the castle. They've got a glass slipper, and they say the prince will marry only the girl whose foot fits the slipper. I told them you weren't around. It sounds as though they're going to try that shoe on the foot of every maiden in the kingdom until they find you!"

"Oh, Gustav, I can't let them find me—not yet. I've convinced the king to send men to free Bertie from the prison at Devin. Prince Henry is going to lead them."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go with. Do you think it would be possible for you to sneak up to my attic and fetch my armor?"

Gustav hardly blinked at her request, nor did he question her plan to go. In fact, he seemed pleased with her plan. "Most of the king's men are gone now. They've left a pair of guards at our front gate to intercept you if you come home that way."

"Then I shall be sure to avoid the front gate. When you visit my attic, could you also fetch me all my maps, as well as my boyish clothes? They should all be in the green satchel, together. And don't forget my helmet and boots—all I have is one glass slipper." Ella told Gustav exactly where to find everything, and he hurried off to bring them back to her.

She had a long wait before he came back, and she'd begun to fear something must have happened, when he finally darted down the edge of the pasture, along the cover of the woods.

"What's happened?" She asked as he approached breathlessly.

"More men from the castle. These claim I'm to go on the mission to rescue your brother."

"Yes, that's right. I should have mentioned it. I told them you could identify him. Did you agree to go?"

"I said I would, but they wanted to leave straightaway. I made them to believe I needed to fetch my things, then I made exit from the rear door when no one was looking. Now, here you are. Is this all you needed?" Gustav handed over the maps

all rolled and bundled in Ella's leather map case, and her armor, helmet, and sword as well, besides the clothes and other things she'd requested in the green satchel. He also gave her a chunk of cheese and bread from the kitchen.

"Very good." Ella thanked him repeatedly for all his help.

"I'm glad to do it. It's a much better adventure than sitting here waiting on the fish," he said, his eyes sparkling so that Ella was sure he meant it. "They said we're headed to the dock at Ratisbonne."

"Yes, that's the plan. I will meet you there."

"Here is this more," Gustav said, and pressed a pouch into her palm.

"What is this?" Ella felt the form of coins inside the pouch, and peeked in through the opening to confirm. "I can't take your money."

"Take it. Ratisbonne is a three-day journey even at a dead gallop. You're going to need to keep your strength up, and I know you've neither food nor coin. The king's men have promised to meet my every need, plus a stipend beside, so I've no use for it. Go on now, and Godspeed to you."

Ella hugged him goodbye, and he ran back up to the house, while she ducked away into the woods to change into her armor.

Ella had no choice but to reach the river port before Prince Henry's ships set off for Devin. If she missed them, she'd likely never catch up to them again, not unless they ran aground. No horse could run as fast as a ship sailing downstream, especially with men at the oars, and most certainly not when the ships would be sailing night and day without rest.

Mirage, of course, would have to rest.

The journey to Ratisbonne would normally take more than three days. By carriage, it often took an entire week.

Ella didn't have a week to reach the city, and neither did the men from Charmont. The Danube was relatively small that far upstream, and quite dependent on spring rains besides. They simply could not waste any more time reaching it. She

explained her plans to Mirage. "Once we reach Ratisbonne you can rest, but until then, we've got to go as fast as we can, and we've got to stay off the main route. I don't want to be seen until after I'm on that ship."

Mirage dipped her head as though she understood.

Ella checked over her maps and plotted her route. There were several places where, if she skirted fields and woods instead of sticking to the course of the roads, she could trim some distance from her trip. This was, of course, assuming that no one came after her for trespassing on their land.

I committed her intended route to memory, and vowed to do my best, by flying high, to not only keep us on course, but also to watch for any landowners who might not care to have Ella riding alongside their fields, and warn her away before she got caught.

In this manner we made the trip. Mirage was a great sport, galloping swiftly whenever the paths allowed it, and keeping as brisk a pace as possible when the way was difficult. Mirage helped herself to grass in those places where she wasn't moving too quickly to eat, and Ella made sure to stop frequently for the horse to water.

She rode well into the night, helped by a bright moon. After only a few hours' sleep on the hard ground, she rose again to take advantage of the pre-dawn cool of the day.

The second day was hot, even hotter than the first, so that by mid-day Ella paused at a remote stretch of stream, and both she and the horse took a swim to cool off.

By the third day, she was exhausted, and her entire body ached. But Mirage, true to her lineage, kept up the demanding pace.

They reached Ratisbonne as the ships were loading. Ella wasn't sure how she'd sneak on, but she supposed her best chance was to ride up looking like she knew what she was doing, in the hope that no one would question her.

This might have worked, save for the fact that no horses were boarding.

Henry was overseeing all the activity himself, and

recognized Mirage and Ella straightaway, even from a bit of a distance. He handed his ledger to the assistant next to him and dismissed himself, somehow managing to disguise his relieved delight almost until he reached Ella's side.

She saw him approaching and, since there was no escaping now that he'd seen her, and since he did look overwhelmingly pleased, she slid from her saddle to greet him.

"I'd embrace you, but everyone is watching," Henry said when he reached her, still beaming with happiness that she was among them. "I've been worried about you."

"You had to guess I'd meet you here," Ella chided him, looking up at him from close range as he crowded her as close as he dared. She was dressed as Allard, and would have to play that role for the entire trip, as the men would not likely accept a woman in their midst. Besides that, she'd already spotted Dominic and other men she recognized. They would know her as Allard, and she did not intend to confuse them.

Henry didn't seem too surprised to see her, though he was clearly glad about her arrival. "Your man Gustav told me you'd try to make it, and it's not that I doubt your ability to get through any situation on your own, but you must know, Richard hasn't been seen since the night of the ball."

"Richard the fourth?" Ella clarified.

"Yes, Richard, Raedwald, whatever you wish to call him. That cousin of mine is missing, and so is enough stolen tax money to raise an army and go to war. He's up to something. I'm just glad he hasn't caught up to you."

"As am I. I've kept to the back roads and cut across country. I haven't seen anyone of interest since I left Gustav with your men at Caprese."

"Well, they've brought him here. He's aboard already. Resting. He's a tough old man, but he's still an old man, and it was a hard ride to reach here."

"How are the water levels?" Ella asked, concerned that they might not be able to sail.

"Falling. Reports from upstream are that we haven't much left. Today will be the last day to sail, and we're going to go

hard at the oars to keep ahead of it. Besides that, we won't be taking any horses. The only ships strong enough to carry them are too deep in the hull. We're on the light barges, capped at fifty men each. It's the only way we've got any chance of getting through on these levels."

Ella looked over at the boats, which were merchant barges. It made sense not to approach the city looking like a military convoy. And if they could load her father's carts onto the merchant barges at Devin, they could perhaps row some way upstream toward home before the river became too dry to float them.

"Sigismund is going to take Bastian to a local stable and keep him there," Henry explained. "I can have him lodge Mirage as well."

"That would be best. She's a tired girl after the ride here, and Sigi knows her preferences."

"I'm impressed you made it." Henry looked down at her fondly. "It's not an easy journey."

"Of course I made it. I don't expect you to rescue my brother without me."

"After your abrupt exit the night of the ball, I wasn't sure what to expect. Why did you leave so suddenly?"

"It's…a bit tricky to explain. I'll tell you all about it later."

"Did I offend you?"

"No," Ella might have laughed, but the prince looked serious. "Henry, goodness no, of course you didn't. Why would you think that?"

"At the strategy meeting, for hour after hour, you never got to talk. When you had something to say, which was always helpful input, you had to speak through me. Didn't it burn you up inside, to know you have as much insight or more into the situation, and yet the men would not even let you speak?"

"I'm used to it," Ella admitted, though she felt a sting of sadness that a person could get used to such a thing, especially in light of Henry's rightly-placed indignation.

Henry did not look at all appeased. If anything, his frown deepened. "When we are wed, I shall make clear to everyone

that they are to esteem your voice as highly as mine."

"That's dear of you. I'd be happy if they esteemed *your* voice as highly as they should."

Henry looked at her face as she spoke, and found kindness there in the words that otherwise might have stung. "You did notice that, then? They still think of me as a child. Well, why shouldn't they? All I've ever been allowed to do is play at tournaments."

"You do well there, and the men on the circuit respect you."

"But tournaments are only play. This, however—this is real, what we're sailing into. The trade embargo is a sincere problem that effects everyone, and my father has been unable or unwilling to resolve it. If I can restore trade, or even get goods through in any way, the people might begin to see me as a capable leader."

"I know you are a capable leader," Ella assured him. In truth, she knew their odds of success were not favorable, but that didn't mean Henry lacked skill as a leader.

It simply meant they were going to attempt that at which everyone else had failed.

Ella didn't want to dwell on the unlikelihood of their success. Instead, she reassured him on his initial question. "You did not offend me the night of the ball. You were my voice. I had to leave because of something else entirely. I will explain later, I promise."

"I trusted you had a reason," Henry continued, "which is why, when you took the small door near the throne room, I pointed everyone the other way and said I'd seen you dart down that hall."

Ella grinned at his quick thinking. "Didn't the guards question you?"

"That's one small benefit to being a prince. Even if they knew I was wrong, they wouldn't say a thing. Just follow orders. But I did wonder. And you left your shoe. It's the strangest thing—no one else can get their foot in it. I saw it come from your foot, but I can't understand. Did you really

wear it?"

"I did. I've got the other in my map bag."

"Speaking of, where's the rest of your luggage?"

"There isn't any. I didn't have time for anything else. Your father's men were swarming Caprese looking for me. It was all I could do to send Gustav after the essentials."

"Maps and armor," Henry observed, then laughed. "You are the only girl for me."

Ella beamed at him, and wished they weren't on such a crowded dock, so that she might kiss him.

"We've got to find a place for you on the boats."

"I can hang a hammock alongside the men."

"I'd rather you didn't. There's a cabin to each boat. They offered me my pick. Gustav's sleeping on one bunk in there right now. Poor old man, he looked beat. I thought I'd put the ranking officers in the other two cabins, but you can take one."

"How will the ranking officers feel about that?"

"They were going to rotate through and sleep in shifts anyway. We may look like merchant vessels, but we're still going to keep a watch at night, if only to be on the lookout for river pirates." Henry snapped his fingers suddenly. "Tell you what, you and I and Gustav can share a cabin and rotate sleep times as well."

Ella nodded, pleased with the plan. "I'm used to sharing quarters with Gustav, and with you."

"You won't see much of me," Henry admitted. "I've had my morning coffee and intend to stay up late. You can turn in early. You look dead on your feet."

"I haven't had coffee since the last time I shared it with you," Ella confessed.

"When you wake, you may brew some of my coffee. I've packed all the necessary staples. We'll have bacon and eggs for breakfast—whatever time your breakfast may be."

"That sounds lovely." Ella didn't bother to admit she hadn't had bacon since last she'd shared it with him, either.

"We're in the lead boat. I'll show you to the cabin. We'll have to be quiet to avoid waking Gustav."

"He doesn't wake easily."

"That's good. The room is small, though still rather comfortable. It's shaded, at least, and sits low enough in the water, the river keeps it cool."

"Heavenly." Ella agreed.

Henry found Sigi, who was excited to see Allard again after so long, and pleased to have a second horse to take care of. Ella explained that Mirage would need special care after her long ride, and Sigi assured her he'd attend to it. He'd grown since Ella had seen him last, and seemed even more capable then before, though she'd never found him lacking.

Ella and Henry boarded the lead boat. It had a large bay inside the hull, which could be used for storage but now held only their supplies, which were mostly food, weapons, and gear. At the rear was the lone cabin, which Henry led her to.

The ceiling was low, so that they nearly had to stoop. The space was small and dark, fitted only with basic bunks along the side walls, two high, for a total of four, which folded out of the way when not in use.

"Here you are," Henry whispered so they wouldn't wake Gustav, who was snoring softly in the darkness. "Pick whichever bunk you'd like. I should get back to overseeing the loading. We'll get under way as soon as we're loaded. The men know not to bother the cabin. You look exhausted. Get some rest." He hurried away.

Ella felt a pang of loss. She had hoped that in the privacy of the small cabin, he might kiss her again. But of course, he'd already been away from his work for an unexpectedly lengthy amount of time.

And she was completely spent from her journey, having slept only a few hours for the last several nights, and none of that very deeply out of her concern that she might oversleep and arrive too late to board the boats.

"Fairy Godmother," she whispered as I grew just large enough to provide a cool blue glow to the dark cabin, "what am I going to tell him? How can I explain why I left the ball?"

"Why don't you tell him the truth? Is that so difficult?"

"If I tell him the truth, he'll have to know about you."

We'd discussed something on the long ride to Ratisbonne, and I knew Ella had contemplated it at length, so I mentioned it now. "The old Roman fortress at Devin has a massive and complex system of dungeons, didn't you say? And we both agreed I'd be the best one to scout it out and find your brother, so that if you have to spring him loose, you'll know where to look, correct?"

"Yes."

"So, Prince Henry will need to know about me if he's going to approve the plan and receive any information I gather. You might as well tell him. If the two of you are going to be married, I'll be his daughter's Fairy Godmother someday."

"Is it really all right if I tell him about you?"

"All right?" I laughed. "I don't see any way around it."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ella slept long and hard, and awoke to darkness in the pre-dawn hours of the night.

Gustav had awakened earlier and left the cabin.

Henry had entered the cabin and was pulling off his boots, preparing to go to sleep. He saw Ella roll over and blink at him, so he whispered, "There's no need for you to get up just now. Go back to sleep if you like."

But Ella had slept well, and was now more curious than she was tired. "How did the day go? Is the river full enough to carry us?"

"Only just. We've set the men to oars and kept them at it into the cool of the night. They're sleeping now, but the current is weak, so we're not going very fast without their rowing. We'll put them to it again tomorrow. Still, we haven't run aground, though I've seen gravel and sandbars aplenty. More than I wish to see."

"Any sign of pirates?"

"None. Either they're good at hiding, or they've given up on pirating this stretch of river. With trade cut off at Devin, I don't doubt they've had little to pirate. Not enough to bother with, I imagine."

Ella listened, but the entire time Henry was talking, she wondered in the back of her mind how he would take the news that she had a fairy godmother. She wasn't even sure how to broach the subject, but she had thought of one thing that might prepare him for her great revelation.

"Did you want to see my glass slipper?" She asked, sitting up and grabbing her map case, from which she pulled the glass shoe.

The room was almost completely dark, but I perched on a beam above their heads, and turned up my glow enough to provide a little light.

Henry didn't notice me. His attention was focused entirely

on the glass slipper. "It looks just like the one you left behind at the ball. But tell me, how did you dance all night in such a small shoe? Your feet aren't that small. And yet, I saw the shoe leave your foot. No one could fit their foot in that slipper—not even a child. I know because people at the palace attempted to try on the other shoe, especially when I announced I'd only wed the girl whose foot fit the slipper." He seemed utterly puzzled by the mystery.

"Watch." Ella told him, though she needn't have said anything. Henry's eyes were riveted on the shoe as she slid it easily onto her foot.

"How—how did you do that? It grew." Henry shook his head, as though questioning whether his eyes were seeing things.

"It's a magic slipper," Ella explained softly.

"I can see that." Henry looked at her quizzically, smiling. Then he tipped his head to one side thoughtfully. "Why is this room so light? Is there light coming from somewhere above that beam?"

"Yes," Ella answered. Her heart trembled fiercely inside her as she braced herself for sharing her secret. How would he take it? Would he call her crazy?

"Is that magic, too?" Henry asked.

"Yes. And it's the same magic that made me run from the ball at midnight."

"Midnight?" Henry questioned, and sat next to her on the bunk. "You know, my mother used to tell me of a magic that ended at midnight. I thought of that, when you fled at the stroke of twelve." He peered closely into her face. "You are real, aren't you? And you're really a girl?"

"Yes, I'm both real and a girl," Ella promised solemnly.

Henry tipped his head again. "Fairy magic ends at midnight. Fairy magic from fairy wishes."

"How do you know about those?"

"My mother had a fairy godmother. She used to say that only royal women had fairy godmothers."

Ella had never heard that claim, and looked up at my glow

coming from the beam above. "Only royal women? Fairy Godmother, do you know anything about that?"

I'd been hiding out of sight the entire time, but since she'd addressed me, and Henry had gasped with surprise or yelped in fear, I grew to the size of a hummingbird and flew down to greet him.

He jumped back, yelping.

"Hello to you, too, Prince Henry," I said with a chuckle.

His eyes were round, but he slowly moved back closer to where he'd been sitting before he jumped away. "F-fairy Godmother?" he asked.

"Yes. That's what I go by. Although it sounds as though I'm not the only one with that title."

Ella was not nearly as disturbed by our conversation as Henry seemed to be. She asked me straightaway, "Do you know anything about only royal women having fairy godmothers?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" I declared. "Any girl can have a fairy godmother. I don't believe there are rules about that. It's just that we go away once you've used up your three wishes. The only explanation for that rumor that I can think of, is that many a girl with a fairy godmother might wish to be a princess. And I suppose, that way, most do end up royal. But your mother and grandmother and all the rest never cared about such things as crowns and castles, so none of them ever wished for it. Simple as that!"

Henry listened solemnly, then asked Ella, "How many wishes do you have left?"

"Just one. I used my second to get to the ball. It wouldn't have been possible to see you otherwise, and we'd have missed our chance to get to Bertie. So I don't regret it, not at all. But that's why I had to flee at midnight—my gown turned back into a servant's dress, and my coach into a pumpkin."

"A pumpkin?" Henry asked with a chuckle.

"Yes." Ella laughed as well.

"But you've only one wish left?"

Ella nodded. "And once I've wished my last wish, Fairy

Godmother will be gone from my life. She's quite useful even without the wishes. She can glow, which is a handy trick. She's saved me by her glow alone more times than I can count. And she can fly up high and scout ahead. We were thinking she could even fly into the old Roman fortress for us, and find my brother so we know where to go to spring him out."

"She'd solve a great deal of our problems if she could do that for us," Henry concluded, then addressed me. "You don't mind doing it?"

"I'm not good for much," I admitted. "My magic is weak and always ends at midnight. If there's any way I can make myself useful, I never hesitate to do it. Otherwise, what good is it to have a fairy godmother?"

Henry appeared visibly relieved. "That would be a great help to us, though I do fear for your safety."

"What could possibly happen to me?"

"Someone might squash you like a bug." Henry offered with some hesitancy.

"Squash me like—why, I've never heard of such a thing as a fairy being squashed like a bug," I insisted, though of course, the possibility had occurred to me before. Still there was no evidence for it. "I believe we're quite unsquashable. Mercy me! And don't you think I'm a bit nimbler than to allow myself to be flattened if I could see it coming? Weathervanes and windowpanes and wish-wash all the same!" I was, as you may have gathered, flustered by his suggestion.

But I did manage to establish that I would be, if not entirely safe, at least sufficiently so on my planned reconnaissance mission.

Still, there was the rest of the trip downriver to accomplish before any of that would even matter, and getting down the river turned out to be no easy task.

The river was, as we'd all feared, flowing away right out from beneath us. Henry had the men set to the oars near round the clock, but there were still times when the men had to jump out onto the gravel spits to lighten the boats so they'd float high enough not to run aground. At those times, the men would run

alongside the boat, gripping the edge of the hull, and literally pull it downstream.

Even at that, we were moving faster than we might have any other way. Ella fretted over what Bertie must be enduring in prison, and whether he was getting anything to eat, or if perhaps he'd been chained and left to rot. Because of her fears, she took her own turn at the oars, and ran alongside the other men as they hauled the boats across the shallowest stretches.

The worst of it was the night between the fifth and sixth day, when we ran aground no fewer than eight times under the cover of darkness, and clouds hid the moon, and the men had to jump overboard unable to see what they were jumping into, and run headlong into blackness, tripping over driftwood and stumbling as the riverbed dropped off underneath their feet. It was a messy trial, and more than once men fell behind, so that someone else had to help them along, and they sprinted back to join us as we tried to stall the boats for them (both times they were men from the lead or middle boat, who were at least able to catch up to the rear barge. Had they been men from the rear barge, we may well have had to leave them behind).

But by the afternoon of the sixth day, we'd passed enough flush tributaries that the river flowed slightly more full, and though we had to pull a few times more after that, it was never so bad again.

Ella monitored their position on the maps using landmarks and the names of the towns and villages they passed. She also consulted with Henry and his chief advisors regularly, pouring over her maps as they made their plans.

The Danube flowed nearly straight east as it approached Devin. Another slightly smaller river, the Morava, flowed down from the north, emptying into the Danube practically in front of Devin castle, before the joined rivers flowed on along a southward path.

There were no bridges for many furlongs, not until the town of Pressburg, which was half an hour's march downriver from Devin, and the site of the military garrison. The maps Ella had brought showed the road and the bridge, but they didn't

really offer much help toward reaching the old Roman fortress.

With no bridge near at hand (and the nearest one leading straight to the local soldiers), we'd have to cross the river in the barges to reach the castle (which sat high above the sharp cliffs on the eastern bank). The only other option besides the barges themselves were our three scuttle boats which were strapped, one on each barge, at the rear of the cabins. But the scuttle boats only held three or possibly four small men.

They were stealthier, much stealthier, but they wouldn't transport many men.

Ella (dressed as Allard, of course, as she was the entire trip) advocated that everyone stay out of sight. Rather than sailing straight up to the castle with its old Roman fortress, she suggested the men send a scouting party (which would include her and, obviously, me) to size up the situation.

"The river bends sharply northward less than an hours' hike from the confluence of the Danube and Morava," she explained, pointing to the spot on the map. "We should pull our barges aground, here, on the low flood plain, and send a scouting party over to assess the situation."

Some of the men were skeptical. "In theory that's a fine plan," argued a stout lord named Bruce, "but everything worth scouting is on the other side of the river. How do you propose to get across if you leave all the boats here?" He pointed to the same low flood plain she'd suggested.

Since she couldn't very well tell him I was going to fly across, Ella was at a loss to explain.

Dominic (yes, Allard's old friend from tournament days), was quick to point out to Bruce, "They're sure to have watchmen all over the banks. They'll see us approaching if we come by barge. Even if we take the scuttle boats across, they'll spot them clear as they'd see a log floating downstream."

"Then we shouldn't try to sneak up on them," Bruce maintained. "Why don't we just sail the barges right up and say, 'hey there, you thieving rats, you've got our merchants and their goods, now give them back.'?"

Henry answered his question before he'd quite finished

asking it, "Because they've thrown every man who's tried to do so into their dungeon. We're not going to do them any good if we get thrown into shackles, too."

"Perhaps if we went in with the keys," a small man named Philip suggested. "If they chained us in the dungeon, we'd be right where we needed to be."

"Don't you think they check the pockets of their prisoners before they lock them up?" asked another noble named Lothar.

"We could swallow the keys," Philip offered, "and then—"

But Henry cut Philip off as the smaller man made a straining face. "We're not going to purposely get ourselves captured. We may well do it by accident, but don't go swallowing any of our keys. We intend to use them."

Ella was still back on Dominic's comment about a floating log. "If we float on a log at night, under the cover of darkness—"

"Float on a *log*?" asked Philip, making a face that suggested her idea was crazy (though he was the man who'd proposed swallowing the keys). "You might as well swim." He laughed.

Bruce and Lothar laughed, too.

"I'm just saying, a log doesn't look like a boat. And I can swim," Ella maintained.

"So can I," Dominic added.

"In a *river*?" Lothar asked. "The *Danube*? The current would pull you under."

"I can swim as well," Henry offered. "But I'd rather float across with a log."

"Oh, no." Bruce shook his head. "You're not swimming anywhere. I promised your father we'd bring you back alive. You're not going to be a part of the scouting party."

Their conversations went much like that, with little resolved (though Henry did eventually promise he would not attempt to swim across the river, and the general consensus was that the scuttle boats would be almost as stealthy as logs, but far drier). When Ella suggested that the lack of bridge would be to their benefit, since any pursuers would have to go out of

their way to cross and come after them, Lothar was quick to point out that any arrows their archers shot would not be hindered by the lack of a bridge.

It was pointed out that there was the bridge at Pressburg, which wasn't *that* far away. Gustav, who'd been with Bertie and Robert when the carts and horses were first confiscated, informed everyone of where both had been kept—near the garrison at Pressburg. There was no guarantee they were still there, or even that they still existed, but his information at least gave them a place to look (though how they'd go about looking remained a topic of debate).

The discussion was just as hot when they tried to decide how best to approach the old Roman castle. Ella had seen it before in her travels, as had some of the others. They did their best to provide the rest with accurate sketches that portrayed both the primary cliff, and the steep hills on either side around.

"Why would you even want to scale the cliffs?" Bruce demanded to know. He'd seen them before and considered them insurmountable. "There's grassy hillside all around, and it's not that far out of the way."

"*Steep* grassy hillside," Dominic corrected, "with archers at the top. How many arrows do you think they would rain down on us while we attempted to climb up?"

"We brought shields," Bruce countered. "That's what the shields are for."

And on and on and on, until I began to fear we'd sail right up to the castle before anything was resolved. Instead, to my surprise, on the tenth night as Ella was sleeping, there came a noisy ruckus on the deck, and the ship began to jostle fiercely. It was even worse than the fifth night when we'd run across the gravel spits, because then, at least, the ship was headed in a consistently-forward direction.

But this night the entire boat swung heavily side-to-side in a jerky fashion, so that Ella nearly tumbled off her bunk.

She peeked out to see what the fuss was. "We're coming ashore," she observed. "Where are we?"

Without waiting for an answer, she dressed hurriedly and

slipped on her boots, strapping on her sword in case the commotion had to do with pirates or the merchant blockade.

Then came the tricky part—exiting the cabin without being seen. She and Henry had agreed that, along with keeping her identity a secret, they ought not let on that she was sleeping in the main cabin instead of below decks. With the rotating schedules for sleeping and rowing, this had not been a problem. And the one time a man saw Ella leaving the cabin (they usually had their backs to her when they rowed, or when on the lookout for gravel spits ahead), she happened to have a map in her hand, and waved it at him, explaining that she was fetching it for the prince.

Not that the man even questioned, or seemed to care.

Still, she didn't want to be discovered or questioned with any sincerity, so she looked carefully about before exiting.

Henry was already up, having not yet retired to bed, and Ella spotted him trotting on dry ground alongside the boat.

She ran to the rear of her craft in time to see him alongside several other men, working to pull the second boat ashore.

"Where are we?" she asked Philip, who had come to watch the proceedings from the stern.

"Near to approaching Devin castle." He pointed behind them, where distant torches shined like yellow stars in a line. "We came aground to avoid being seen, but there's little for cover here. Once the sun's up, they're likely to spot us."

Ella looked around and noticed that the side of the river where they had come aground was level floodplain, the fertile soil planted to grains right up to the riverbanks in every direction.

She hopped off the boat and trotted over to Henry, who had just finished helping to pull the second boat ashore, and was headed to the third.

"Shall I assemble the scouting party? We need to finish our reconnaissance before sunrise, or we'll be seen and lose the advantage of pulling in to shore."

"Do that, and hurry," Henry agreed. "And don't be misled if you return to this spot and see the boats gone. I allowed us to

sail much too close to the castle in the darkness. There's a grove of trees a few furlongs back downstream. We'll try to row back that way and hide in their cover."

"I'll look for you there," Ella agreed.

She and Henry had discussed their scouting party previously, and while the larger group had never reached any agreement, the pair of them (together with me, of course) had decided the "scouting party" should consist only of Ella and me.

After all, Bruce had forbidden Henry from going for fear he might lose his life, and neither of them wished to explain to even one more person that a magical fairy was going to be the only one doing the scouting.

So Ella ran down the riverbank, alone save for my tiny twinkle perched atop her right ear. She sprinted swiftly for two reasons—one, we didn't know how long my reconnaissance might take, and she wanted to have the job completed before sunrise.

But equally important, she didn't want any of Henry's men to see her leaving, for fear they might try to come after her.

When she'd thought it through before, she'd remembered the floodplain as being rimmed with bushes all along the riverbank. These, she now realized, had been swept away by high waters in the years since last she'd traveled that way. So the cover she'd hoped would hide her, wasn't there.

Which was probably why she didn't get far before heavy footfalls and panting filled the air behind her.

"Hey there. Allard?" The approaching soldier at least had the good sense not to shout. He didn't even whisper very loudly.

Ella thought about trying to outrun him, but there was nowhere to hide, and she didn't want to jump into the river with her boots on (and if she took the time to take them off, of course he would catch up to her).

"Stop there, you." The voice came again, closer this time. It sounded like Bruce, which made Ella cringe, because Bruce was one of Henry's biggest critics, who treated him, not like a

prince, but like a child in need of protection. No doubt the man viewed Allard much the same way.

With little other choice, Ella stopped and turned around, hoping against hope that the man behind her wouldn't be Bruce.

Chapter Thirty

It was Bruce.

"Allard, Boy, where are you heading?"

"Scouting party. Henry sent me alone, since no one else could agree. I've got to hurry. I want to be back to the boats before sunrise." She kept jogging down the riverbank toward the confluence.

"You can't go alone," Bruce protested, jogging alongside her. He wore his sword, as well, and kept one hand on the hilt as he ran.

"It's more discreet this way."

"What if something happens to you?"

"Look, I need to be going," Ella insisted in her deepest, most authoritative voice, and picked up her pace. "I think Prince Henry may need your help with the boats. He talked about taking them back upstream to the cover of those trees. He'll need every strong man he can get."

"Nonsense." Bruce kept up with surprisingly little effort. "He doesn't need one more man—the men are tripping over each other, there's so many of them already. You can't scout out all of Devin castle all by yourself. You'll be captured or drowned, or fall to your death from those cliffs. That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard, sending the smallest man on the boat all alone."

They were nearly to the confluence by this time, so Ella slowed and looked up at Bruce. "Actually, it makes a great deal of sense to send the smallest person. They're the least likely to be seen."

Ella had been weighing her options all this time. She obviously wasn't going to get rid of Bruce. She thought about signaling to me to fly on ahead—after all, I could fly fast as a streak and find her again whether she went back to the boats or stayed to wait for me on the bank.

But the truth of it was, she and Henry had discussed the

possibility of bringing another person in on the secret of my existence. After all, it only made sense that more than one person go on the scouting party. Neither of them thought it wise to take Gustav. Not only was he still weak from the rushed trip to the river port, but no reasonable man would really think an eighty-year-old had swum the river, scaled a cliff, slipped past guards, and then done it all again in reverse without getting caught or going into cardiac arrest.

And since several men knew Allard as Bertie's brother (many, like Dominic, were familiar with the pair from their tournament circuit years), Gustav was not needed to identify the location of the key merchant they sought to release.

When they'd tossed around the names of men who might be understanding of their choice to send a fairy godmother to scout for them, they'd never come up with a satisfying option.

Ella really didn't see Bruce as a major contender for sympathetic co-conspirator, but by this point, he'd more or less foisted himself into the job. She had no desire to let him in on my true identity—fairy godmothers, after all, only exist for girls, and Ella didn't want to spill all her secrets—but she decided the most expedient way to proceed, at that moment, was to explain the real plan.

She held out her hand. "The smallest person can go nearly undetected."

Bruce looked as though he was about to laugh, but then he saw my glow.

I started out small as a twinkle, then grew to the size of a grasshopper on Ella's upturned palm, keeping my glow to a bare minimum so I wouldn't give us away to the watchmen at the castle.

"What is this witchcraft?" Bruce asked.

His response was not a reassuring one.

"This," Ella explained patiently, "is our scout. She can fly."

I did so, circling Bruce's head once, swiftly, before returning to my perch on Ella's hand.

"So, we don't have to swim the river or climb the cliffs. She can get in and out of the castle without being seen, and

report back to us exactly what's going on over there."

"Exactly what's going on over there, is that men are asleep. She's not going to learn anything."

"She'll learn where the merchants are chained, and plot us a route to reach them."

"She's a *bug*," Bruce snarled, looking as though he might try to swat me at any moment.

"Go on, little scout," Ella called to me, before Bruce could swat me.

I flew swiftly, eager to be on with my task. When I reached the old fortress, I looked back, just once, to see Ella and Bruce with swords drawn, locked in furious battle. Ella appeared to be holding her own just fine, as well I knew she could after so many tournament fights, and since I doubted there was little I could do to aid her against Bruce, I flew like a stray spark over the heads of the guards, through the tiny barred window set high in the wooden door, and down the hall, following my nose.

The smell was atrocious, as was the sound. It was a kind of collective moaning, a human anguish that had grown so intolerable it became audible. There was a rattle of chains like a haunting, a few quiet sobs, the occasional desperate cry…but mostly, there was the moaning.

I flew above their heads, moving as swiftly as I dared, scanning each face for the one I sought. My stomach churned at the sight of them—cheeks hollowed from hunger, hair unkempt and almost certainly crawling with bugs, stinking of sweat, the rotten breath of hunger, and their own filth.

But what startled me most of all was that none of them looked like the type of man you'd expect to see chained in a dungeon. These were not hardened criminals or even revolutionaries. These were merchants. Working men, used to travel, they had once been fit and well-dressed.

They were also, many of them, young. Bertie, being a year younger than Ella, was only fifteen, but I judged some of the boys in the dungeon to be younger than that. Most of them were dozing, braced against the wall, unable to lie down

because of the shackles at their wrists.

I looked for young faces with pale hair, steeling myself for the way Bertie might look when I finally found him, but I spotted another familiar face first.

"Rolf!" I was so shocked, I yelped his name aloud.

He awoke and looked at me blearily. "Sweet angel of death, have you come for me?" he whispered.

"Merciful heavens, I'm not the angel of death. I'm your ticket to freedom."

"Freedom?" Rolf questioned, his voice rough and dry. "The only ones who get out of here are carried out. Dead. Three more last week. Don't let the shackles rub you. Infection sets in. It's not a pretty way to die."

That was the other scent I smelled, on top of all the others. Infected flesh. It turned my stomach, and I resolved that we wouldn't just free Bertie or even Bertie, Rolf, and their friends.

I couldn't leave any of these men and boys behind, not to face a death like that.

"Don't you worry, Rolf. We're going to get you out of here. Now, where's Bertie?"

"Bertie of Caprese?" Rolf spoke the name a little louder, calling it out as though asking for his friend.

"Here, Rolf. Still here. Go back to sleep."

Before Bertie was quite done speaking, I'd flown over to him.

He recognized me immediately, and his face brightened. "Fairy Godmother?" he whispered with excitement.

"Yes, it's me." I kept my voice down as well, hoping the sleeping men beside us would not awaken or cause a commotion. I had too much to do to waste any time with a commotion. "Your sister's here with Prince Henry and a hundred and fifty men. We're going to free you all, but I need you to tell me how best to do it."

"The guards at the main doors have keys. Knock them out, take their keys, unlock us, and we can all run out the door, roll down the hill, and swim away to freedom."

"Can everyone swim?"

"I doubt it. You'd need rafts, then, or boats, or something to float them on."

"Are they strong enough to do it?" I'd been studying Bertie's face as we talked. He wasn't in as bad of shape as the men and boys I'd passed when I'd first entered. He hadn't been there as long.

"Most of them, if they don't have an infection. They do feed us once a day, a big pot of gruel with a wooden spoon. They walk down the line and shove each man a bite, one after the other, and walk back and forth until the food's all gone. We get water morning and evening, much the same way. It's not much, but we've enough strength to roll down a hill and away."

"Good, good," I said. "Now, where are the carts and horses? Are they still being held at Pressburg as before?"

"They were when last I saw them, but that's been weeks."

"How heavily are they guarded?"

"Guarded? The horses have barely enough men assigned to them to keep them fed. They're not brushed down nor hardly cared for. As for the carts, there were a handful of guards that I saw. We thought about trying to take them, but Father insisted we do right by the law, sham law that it is, and present our papers to the officials. Not only did they turn us down, they arrested us on the spot. We resisted. Father was killed."

By the time he reached the end of his story, Bertie was weeping silent tears.

So it was true, then, about Robert. I knew Ella had harbored some hope her father might still be alive, but Bertie had watched him die. It wasn't just a lie from Thomas.

"Bertie, I'm so sorry. Your father was a great man. We're not going to let you die here. If you can, spread word among the men—but quietly, so the guards don't overhear. Tell them we're coming, under the cover of darkness, if we can. Possibly even yet tonight. What do you know of the political situation?"

"Ah, that's the one good to come from this dungeon. Some of the prisoners are here because they don't agree with what's going on. They're quite vocal about it, so I've learned many things. Here's the heart of it, though. Did you notice any pirates

on the river?"

"None. We thought that odd."

"Quite odd. It's because they've all been bought off to help with a different level of piracy. None of the local kings actually favor what's going on. Pressburg, Devin, none of the surrounding kingdoms want the trade routes stopped, but they're powerless against the combined efforts of the Saracens. The Saracens, through the efforts of their armies and the pirates, have stopped trade. None of the kings dare resist them, because they've infiltrated their castles and have threatened to kill all their families."

"That's awful!"

"Yes, but it's not just the wealth of the trade routes they're after, and it's not just the Saracens behind it. They couldn't afford the kind of war they're waging. Someone's bankrolling it—we just don't know who. There's rumors it might be Richard, the king's brother, trying to use this situation to help him gain the crown. That much makes sense, but how could he ever afford it?"

"He's doubled everyone's taxes, paid the king his usual sum, and kept all the rest for himself," I explained swiftly. "Enough to start a war. I don't dare linger. We need to get you out of here and put a stop to all of this."

"If we can get the merchant carts through to Charmont, Richard will fail," Bertie agreed. "But the Saracens have warriors aplenty, and they'll come after you. Cavalry run far faster than merchant caravans."

"I know, Bertie. But we've got to try. Tell the others. We'll be back for you soon!" the last bit I called over my shoulder as I shot off like a tiny flash toward Pressburg.

A swift circle of the corral and impound yards told me everything I needed to know, and I flew back to the bank where I'd left Ella fighting with Bruce.

She had the tip of her sword against his leather armor, and held it there, panting, while she made her demands in a growling whisper.

"You will not breathe a word of the fairy to the other men.

Not a *word*. You will follow Henry into battle with no hesitation, and enthusiastically support his every command."

Bruce gritted his teeth and looked pained in the face, but nonetheless agreed. "I promise."

"You will not question me, you will not question our tactics, and you will not do anything to cause even so much as a single man to doubt for one moment that this mission will be anything other than a rousing success. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir. Of course."

By this time, I'd flitted across Ella's line of vision so that she'd seen me.

"Fairy G—" She swallowed the second half of my usual title, recovering quickly. "You're back sooner than I thought."

"I found your brother. It's all quite straightforward. He's in the dungeon at the top of the cliffs. There are two guards at the main door. The carts and horses are just where Gustav said they were. I think we need to go tonight, before our enemies realize we're here. If we catch them unaware, we'll have the advantage. If they have time to assemble a defense, they'll outnumber us a hundred to one, and we'll all be cut down."

Ella nodded once, sharply. "Let's get back to Henry, then," she insisted, and withdrew her sword from Bruce's chest in the same motion as she struck out to run for where we'd left the boats.

Bruce fell into step beside her. As they ran, I quickly informed them of what Bertie had told me regarding the Saracens and Richard's plot.

"I knew Richard was up to something," Bruce said.

Given that he was a bit out of breath from running, I couldn't tell from his voice if he meant the words, or if he actually felt the opposite, and was only saying what he did in an attempt to throw us off.

It was an important question, no doubt, but given that an answer would not be readily forthcoming, I focused my attention on the rescue mission at hand. I'd no sooner explained to Ella about Bertie's thoughts of boats and rafts, than we reached the barges just as Henry was getting the men back on

board to attempt to row upstream, around the bend, and out of sight.

"Hold the boats for now," Ella advised, trotting up to reach him.

He grinned at the sight of her. "Our scouting party is back already. What have you learned?"

While I shrank to little more than nothing and perched upon her ear, Ella explained everything, along with the advice that we act immediately to take our enemies by surprise.

Henry saw the wisdom in her plan. His advisors had gathered around while Ella spoke, so by the end of it, they all knew what was going on as well.

"No point taking the boats back upstream, then," Philip noted. "But it's going to be a trick getting them downstream to pick up the prisoners. Even in darkness, the barges will be visible that close to shore. If we tip them off that we're there, they'll send in reinforcements, and we'll have a battle on our hands."

"But at the same time," Lothar added, "we can't wait until the prisoners reach the river. If they have to wait on the boats, they'll be sitting ducks."

"We'll need a signal," Henry agreed. "As soon as the guards atop the cliff have been incapacitated, we need a signal to let us know it's time to get the boats in position. While the prisoners are being freed, we'll row over. That way, we should reach them just as the men make it to the bottom of the hill."

Ella nodded. "I can send up a bright blue spark," she offered. "The men with the boats can be watching for it. When you see it, row for shore. There's a spit of land all under the cliffs, and it's not too rocky, so you should be able to get close enough to take on passengers, even weakened ones."

With that established, we turned our attention to trying to determine how many men were needed for each task. Ella insisted on going to free the prisoners. She would lead the smallest group—they needed to be able to cross the river in the scuttle boats, and to avoid being seen, they'd cross the Danube near where we stood, carry the boats upstream from the Devin

castle, and cross the Morava upstream from the old fortress, hopefully without being seen.

The bulk of the men would head for the bridge into Pressburg. If they could get across the river without raising an alarm, they'd stand some chance of freeing the horses and merchant carts. It would be a trick, especially since they'd need to hitch the horses to the carts, which were crammed in tight without much room to maneuver. And they'd be doing all of this in darkness, trying to avoid detection, and fighting off any attack.

The remaining men would stay with the boats, watch for Ella's signal, and row to shore to pick up the freed prisoners.

Each group, having accomplished their task, would return to the spot where we now stood. The boats would not be able to make it far upriver, and the prisoners would likely not be fit to travel far on foot. They'd have to ride in the carts, which meant all parties would have to rendezvous somewhere, either on the riverbank or nearer the road that led from the Pressburg bridge, or, if they were hotly pursued, perhaps somewhere downstream.

"We've not much time," Henry informed everyone once that much was established. "The sun will be up before we're done, but it would be best if we could make our approach under cover of darkness. Is everyone ready?"

Henry fielded last minute questions while Ella established her group of eight men (seven besides herself), five of them lighter fellows, and two of them heavier, but the best archers. Together they were the maximum the three scuttle boats could hold. They gathered all the gear they'd need—every Roman-style key, swords and shields, longbows and crossbows, and the arrows they'd prepared, tied to strong-but-light silken ropes, with pronged heads to catch and hold the rock.

Then the two groups set off, one under Henry's command headed toward the Pressburg Bridge, and the other across the Danube in the scuttle boats, leaving the third party to wait with the barges for Ella's signal.

We crossed the Danube well enough out of sight of the

castle. In the light of day they'd have seen us, but the moon was hidden by clouds, so there was nothing to reflect off the water and reveal our wake. We reached the other side and carried the boats. The biting bugs were merciless and the terrain, rough, but we managed to forge a path alongside the Morava to a point some ways upstream from the fortress, which we hoped was far enough as to be out of the sight of the watchmen.

There we put in and, paddling furiously so as not to be swept downstream, we banked far below the castle.

The sheer cliffs gave us some advantage, as they tapered off roundly at the top. No man could stand on their edge and lean over to look down—he'd slide away and fall to his death long before he got the vertical sheer of the cliffs into view.

Ella dispatched half the men, along with half the Roman keys (a fair sampling of each design) and sent them with their bows to the base of the cliffs.

She led the remaining three men up the steep side of the hill. Their shields were dark, so that, in addition to protecting them should the guards above let fly a volley of arrows, they helped somewhat to keep them hidden.

They climbed slowly, silently, just as Ella had previously discussed with her chosen band, and they paused now and then to listen.

There was no clamor of alarm from above, no shout of surprise. When they were three-quarters of the way to the top, she heard the twang of an arrow string, followed by a rattling clatter against the rocks.

"What's that?" a guard asked above. "Is someone there?" His language was somewhat different from that of Charmont, but Ella knew the words from her travels.

"Probably a bird. It's on the cliffs," another guard replied. "You can go see, if you're worried."

"I'm not going any closer to those cliffs than I am now."

"Nor I."

Ella took advantage of their momentary distraction and the cover offered by the sound of their voices, and nodded a signal

to her men before sprinting silently up the rest of the grassy hillside, almost to the rocks. There she paused to catch her breath and listen.

"It came again."

"No, it did not."

"I tell you, I heard the sound again."

"Then go take a look."

"You look."

"You're the one who heard it."

"You've got to have heard it, too. You just don't want to admit it because you don't want to look. You're scared of the cliffs."

"It's wise to be scared of the cliffs."

"That it is but—there, did you hear? It came again!"

All this while, Ella and her men crept closer, taking great care in keeping every footfall perfectly silent, since the men were obviously alert and listening now.

Though the guards kept up arguing even as they listened. "That's the rattle of the chains inside the dungeon, is all. They're all a murmur tonight, haven't you noticed? They're awake and moving more than usual. It's gone to your head. You're hearing it everywhere now."

"I tell you, the sound came from the cliffs. The prisoners aren't rattling their chains at the cliffs, are they?"

As they spoke, the men crept forward, toward the walled edge of the paved walkway, away from the dungeon door.

From up the cliffside, more clanking metal rattled, as the archers who'd shot their arrows attempted the climb.

The two guards heard the sounds, and reached the crenelated battlement, looking down over the wall and shaking their heads. "There's naught to be seen from here, not with the cliff head sloping off at the round."

"Climb over the wall."

"I will not! It's suicide."

"I'll hold your hand so you don't fall."

"As though I'd trust you. Why don't you crawl over, if it's such a great idea?"

As the guards argued, Ella and her men darted as swiftly and silently as they could toward the door. It was, of course, locked.

Then came the tricky part: trying keys in the lock without being heard or seen.

The men climbing the cliff had keys as well, and these rattled as they climbed, drawing the guards' attention. Inside the dungeon, just as the guards had noted, the prisoners murmured, their chains rattling with their every movement.

No doubt they hadn't slept since I'd flown away, leaving Bertie to spread the news of their pending release.

Ella tried two keys before she found one that fit. However, when she tried to open the door, the lock disengaged with a loud clonk.

"What's that?" Both guards spun around, spotting Ella and her men immediately in spite of the darkness.

Ella drew her sword to meet the guards, while shoving her keys into the hands of the man nearest her.

The three took their keys and darted into the dungeon as Ella's blade made contact with that of the first guard.

Chapter Thirty-One

"The signal!" Ella hissed, blocking a blow from the second guard with her shield, while jabbing her blade at the first guard, trying to force him back.

I shot up into the sky, swelling suddenly in size and emitting a burst of brilliant brightness that lit up the night sky like an explosion of fireworks.

"What in heaven!" The guards, already quaking in fear from the rattling sounds at the cliffside, and nervous from the beginning because of the murmuring prisoners, nearly wet themselves in alarm.

Their startled response was all Ella needed. She swiped the keys from the guard nearest her and rushed into the dungeon before the guards quite got over their fear enough to go after her.

She slammed the door in their faces and turned her attention to helping to free the prisoners.

Her three men had already each figured out which key to use, and had started in freeing men as quickly as they could work the locks.

The first three men freed threw themselves against the door, barring the guards from entering.

"Is there a way to lock it from inside?" one man asked.

"Not that I know of," another prisoner answered. "Just lean against it. We don't want it locked. We'll need it open again in a moment."

As more men were freed, they sprang up to hold the door against the assault.

"It's just one guard at the door. I think the other has gone for reinforcements," announced a man at the door, as he peered through the small barred window near the top of the door. "No, wait. He's fighting someone. A swordsman."

One of our archers had made it up the cliffs, then. It was good timing. We needed the distraction.

Unlocking the prisoners was time-consuming work. When another swordsman joined the first, engaging the second guard, the freed prisoners began to sneak out through the door and scramble down the steep hillside toward the riverbank, where Ella and her men had instructed them to meet the approaching barges.

All the rest of the keys were dispensed among the remaining men, so that even the prisoners were unlocking their fellow prisoners. It was an arduous task, and I feared at any moment reinforcements might arrive, or the guards burst in, but after long, tense moments, with the stronger men helping the weak, everyone escaped.

Ella did one last check to be sure everyone was out. Then she, too, fled through the door. "It's empty," she told the archers, who still fought with the guards. "Lock the guards inside the dungeon and let's go!"

The men did so, and joined her at the riverbank just as the first loaded barge departed to row back upstream.

Ella helped the men to board. For a moment it looked as though everyone would make it, with no more trouble than that, but the cliffside echoed with the twang of many bowstrings, giving Ella and her men just enough warning to raise their shields over the men.

Ella had been helping a weakened prisoner, and she nearly shoved him aboard before running to her brother's side.

"Are you all right?" she asked, using her shield to cover them both as another flurry of arrows rained down on them.

"I'm hit in one foot, but we're near the limit of their range, so it barely grazed me. Otherwise I'm fine," Bertie assured her. "Nearly everyone's loaded now. Let's push off!"

Indeed, the first wave of arrows had sent men diving headlong into the boats. Ella made sure her brother was aboard before digging her feet into the mud and giving the barge a hearty shove.

The boat sat low in the sticky mud of the bank, heavy laden with the sudden influx of passengers. It didn't want to move.

Dominic jumped back out and joined her, grunting and

shoving as the craft gave way.

The current caught it even as Ella raised her shield to block the next volley of arrows from striking Dominic as he dived back into the boat.

The rowers were ready with their oars, and plowed through the water, so that Ella had to wade in nearly waist deep before the men pulled her aboard.

There was a break in the shooting as the archers scrambled down the hillside in an attempt to keep the boats in range.

Ella took up a position near the rear of the boat, blocking the arrows that began to strike them from behind. But they were nearly at the limits of the archers range already, and soon every arrow fell short.

"They can't come after us, not without boats of their own." Bertie panted beside her. "The nearest bridge is at Pressburg. That's ten minutes away at a run."

"Less than five at a gallop," Ella noted, turning to assess whether any of the rowers needed help. The men were pulling hard, rowing against the current, and half of those at the oars were freed prisoners.

Still, their first barge made landfall and the men began to pour out, ready to help pull the next boat ashore.

Bertie's comment was a reminder that Henry and his men should be on their way back shortly…assuming their mission had been successful. Once the horses were hitched to the carts, they would be able to complete the relatively short trip across the bridge and down the road without much difficulty.

But the fact that Ella and her men had seen so few soldiers likely meant they were all stationed at the garrison at Pressburg—and would be easily dispatched to deal with Henry and his men.

"Dominic," Ella called, approaching the able leader. "I'm going to leave you in charge here and take a few men toward the bridge to Pressburg. I'll see what's keeping Henry's team."

Dominic agreed, and Ella quickly assembled archers and swordsmen to accompany her. They ran toward the road and bridge.

The sun, as predicted, was starting to rise, painting the eastern sky a rosy pink. The sight of it filled Ella's heart with hope even as she worried about what had become of Henry and his men.

The road was rimmed by trees on either side, so that Ella couldn't see anything of what they were approaching until they reached the road itself. Once they made it to the path, their view was clear across the bridge and into the city. They could hear a clatter and ruckus somewhere in the distance ahead, but the sound was coming from too far away for them to make out anything distinct.

A streak of fire shot through the sky far ahead.

"Was that a flaming arrow?" One of the archers asked.

Pernicious pyrotechnics! Of course, those who didn't want the merchant carts to reach their destination would sooner burn their entire contents than let them get away.

"Let's see what we can do to stop them," Ella insisted, charging ahead. "But try to stay out of sight once we reach the village. It may help if they don't realize we're coming."

They sprinted across the bridge, then ducked behind the first couple of buildings they reached, with half of Ella's team on either side of the street. They peered out past the building and saw horse-drawn carts struggling to make headway toward the bridge, while cavalrymen with swords and lances tried to knock their drivers from their seats.

Ella's archers took aim. "Careful you don't hit any of our men," she told them.

Not that she needed to. She'd selected men with accurate shooting records. Though the horsemen far ahead were moving targets, they managed to graze two of them and startle the rest, so that they paused in their attack.

The drivers took advantage of the distraction to urge their startled horses forward. The frightened animals surged ahead, racing toward the bridge.

More carts and horses followed.

Three of Ella's archers ran alongside the buildings for a closer position. Ella stood watch, scanning each cart as it went

by, looking for Henry.

There was chaos in the streets as the carts thundered forward. Ella's archers took care to pick off the men with the flaming arrows. One cart had been hit, but the driver drove it down to the river, and the men doused the flames with water, putting them out before they ever burned through the outer boards.

Once by one, the carts fled across the bridge, until there was nothing but a herd of horses left. Riders sat bareback on a few steeds at the rear. Ella waved at her archers to catch horses as they came past. Once each of them was successfully mounted, she looked around for a horse of her own, and finally spotted Henry atop an Arabian, one of her mother's horses.

She ran toward him. Another of their horses ran next to the first, and Ella vaulted onto its back before urging it on toward the bridge.

"The cavalry's behind us," Henry informed her as they thundered across the bridge. "Let's lead them away from the carts and our men at the riverbank, if we can."

Ella instantly saw the wisdom in his plan. Though the floodplain was level, the trees along the road blocked most of the view in the direction the carts had fled, save for the patchy open places the carts had squeezed through to leave the road.

"How many men are they?" Ella asked.

"On horseback? Not as many as you might think. We may have stolen most of their horses along with ours. It's so difficult telling one horse from another in the darkness."

"Completely understandable," Ella agreed. She looked back as they tore down the road.

Sure enough, men on horseback approached at a thunderous pace. But instead of following Henry, Ella, and the handful of riderless horses that accompanied them, they turned at the rut-marks left by the carts in the fields.

"We've got to stop them!" Ella brought her mount up sharply and turned.

"The men will need time to get away," Henry agreed, turning as well. "Let's give them as much time as we can."

Ella drew her sword and ran down the first of the horsemen, slashing with her blade, which ripped a hole down the arm of the soldier's leather armor.

He screamed and drew up sharply.

There was another horseman riding at a full gallop behind him, whose mount had to leap out of the way to avoid the first. Ella brandished her sword at him, but he was beyond her reach, and circled around the first man in search of an opening.

Ella turned her horse to head him off. She didn't want anyone making it through to the carts, if she could help it.

Up ahead, three of her archers on horseback saw what was happening and turned back to come to her aid.

She and Henry needed their help. They were vastly outnumbered, and unable to block the floodplain against the advancing horde. Riders skirted past, ignoring their drawn weapons, dancing around their charging horses, and slipping past on the right and the left. In spite of her best efforts, Ella found herself being pushed closer to the boats, carts, and rescued prisoners.

Given that she had only a sword and a shield, and no lance, Ella was unable to unhorse any riders. As more of her men turned back to help bar the way to the encroaching army, fewer of the men tried to ride past her. Instead, they locked blades and attempted to fight their way through.

Off in the distance, she could hear the carts, laden now with passengers in addition to their cargo, headed across the field toward the road.

Unfortunately, she wasn't the only one who noticed where the carts were headed. Some of the riders turned left and attempted to ride after the fleeing carts full of men.

The sun had broken over the eastern horizon by this time, and Ella could see everything more clearly.

It wasn't looking good for the escaping prisoners.

Ella turned her horse to go after the cavalry who were chasing the carts. They'd catch up to them quickly if they're weren't stopped, and the men on the carts were too weak to defend themselves, even if they had weapons, which seemed

unlikely.

The Arabian steed under her bore down on the other horses swiftly, and Ella rode wide of them in an attempt to block them from the side. She swept at the first man, blade drawn, half expecting him to shove her aside and keep going, but he pulled out his sword and blocked her blow.

The horse beneath him halted its charge and turned to face her. The man jabbed with his sword. Ella got her blade under his and swept it up and away (the man was quite a bit taller than she was, and on a higher horse). The soldier whipped his blade around swiftly.

Ella's arms were tired. She'd already fought with Bruce and with the guards atop the tower. Her arms trembled as the larger man tried to use his overwhelming strength against her.

Another of the riders turned his horse and rode at her. She caught just a glimpse of him approaching, but couldn't do a thing about it until she got rid of the first man.

Ella swung her shield over her horse's head, essentially batting her opponent's blade away, but he brought it around again, just as quick. He was overpowering her. She wouldn't be able to hold him off for long, and the second rider was nearly upon her.

The swordsman leaned down hard, his blade crossed with hers, pressing the cold steel close to her face. Ella strained to push back even as the second horseman reached her, blade drawn.

With a loud cry, the first horseman sprang back, dropping his sword as he gripped his bleeding hand.

Ella spun to look at the man who'd just saved her. In spite of the morning light, she could hardly believe what she saw. The man had a gray beard, and he wore a uniform like those of the rest of the cavalry, but his face was that of her father.

Before she could bring herself to speak, the man turned and blocked another oncoming cavalryman.

He was fighting on her side, regardless of his tunic.

Ella urged her mount closer. "Father?"

"Yes, Ella!" He swung his sword, beating the man back,

before turning to her.

"They told me you were dead!"

"I nearly was. Thought it a mortal wound. They put me in the infirmary, and when the soldier in the bed next to mine died, I switched our documents. I've only been well enough to ride for a week."

Ella blocked a blow from another soldier. She'd have embraced her father if she'd thought she could turn her back for even that long on her enemies. Instead she cried, "Do take it easy then, Father!"

"I've been trying to learn what happened to your brother, but I didn't want to give away my identity," Robert added.

"I freed him from the dungeon. He's on one of those carts, if he hasn't found a horse to ride."

"Good." Still, her father hesitated, beaming at her and looking as though he might try to embrace her in spite of the battle raging all around. "You burned brightly, little Cinder," he told her, his voice full with pride. "You're the brightest Cinder, Ella."

Ella's throat grew tight with emotion, but she knew she should not let herself be distracted from the battle at hand. "Catch up to Bertie, Father. I'll take care of this mess." When her father looked reluctant to leave, Ella, fearing he'd only do himself more harm by continuing to fight, added, "Keep him safe!"

That was all Robert needed. He turned his horse and raced ahead, peeling off the enemy's jerkin as he rode.

Ella turned her attention back to the field. Henry was behind her, locked in combat with two cavalrymen. She urged her mount in his direction and rode up with sword drawn, knocking aside the smaller of the two men, whose horse stumbled backward.

Ella slashed at the man with her sword. It wasn't a strong blow, nor a particularly accurate one, but it was enough to topple the already unsteady man from his horse.

Henry gave a cry, and Ella turned around to see him bracing his sword against that of his opponent.

Raedwald.

Ella charged at the interloper, but another cavalryman rode between her and the fighting pair. She locked swords with the newcomer, who kept her full attention until Henry suddenly charged him, knocking him from his horse.

"Raedwald's down!" Henry told her. "Let's catch up to the carts!"

Indeed, a quick glance around told her that, not only was Raedwald unhorsed, but several more of Henry's men had taken horses and weapons and joined the fight now that all the carts were loaded with men, and on their way to Charmont.

She and Henry rode after their countrymen, joining the others who continued to unhorse the last of the enemy men.

Ella had just begun to think they were going to get away after all, when Henry gave a sudden cry and leaned hard against his horse's mane.

He had an arrow in his back.

"Henry!" Ella screamed, riding alongside his horse. She glanced back to see Raedwald back on horseback, with a crossbow in his arms, a gloating smile on his face.

Raedwald's smile faltered an instant before an arrow struck him hard in the shoulder, knocking him from his horse.

Bruce lowered his bow before riding over to help Ella catch Henry, who was sagging off his horse. Bruce caught the prince, holding him under his arms and avoiding the arrow, which was surrounded by a wide bloom of blood.

"Henry!" Ella tipped the prince's face toward her, but the light was already fading from his eyes. "No!"

Bruce trembled, shaking his head, tears already streaming down his cheeks. "I was too late. A second too late. I promised the king I'd bring his son home alive. I've failed."

"No!" Ella insisted, "No!" She glanced around them.

Raedwald fled from the battle field. His injury did not appear to be a mortal one.

If Henry died, the crown would eventually pass to Richard's line. And Richard cared only for his own gain, not for the people of his kingdom.

"Henry, please! Stay with me! Live!" Ella pleaded, but Henry gave no response.

Ella searched the field helplessly. The battle was won. The carts rode on. But her love was fallen.

She looked at me and shook her head. I could see there, simmering on her tears, the decision that tore her heart in two. If she wished her last wish, I'd be gone from her life.

Her wish would end at midnight, and I would still be gone.

She might lose everything.

"Fairy godmother!" Ella screamed through a choking sob. "I wish my final wish. I wish that Prince Henry live, and not die."

I didn't try to remind her of the terms of her final wish. She knew all those things. I could see that in her eyes.

But just as clearly, I could see she also knew her victory meant nothing without the man who'd made it possible—the man who'd risked his life, even given his life, to save her brother and win her hand.

I spun up into the air, and with a shower of blue fairy dust, granted her last wish, and was gone.

Epilogue

I wasn't there to see it when Henry sputtered back to life, or to cringe as Bruce pulled the arrow from his back, or to keep watch over him as he lay gasping in pain in a merchant's cart as they fled away, and Ella confessed all her love for him, and he for her. When she pulled off her cap and used it to wipe away her tears, revealing her long braid, so that all the men realized they'd been led into battle by their soon-to-be princess, I was not with her.

Nor was I beside her to pray fervently for mercy as the hour approached midnight, and Ella wondered if Henry would be taken from her after all.

I was not with her to weep with relief as the next morning dawned and her love was still with her, and she embraced the happy knowledge that no belated chime of midnight would steal away her love and deliver him to death.

Not that the road was easy for him even then. He was weak and his condition tenuous as they made the journey home, pursued now and again by bands of pirates, so they had to fight them off and post watchmen always ahead of and behind them as they went, and were forced to fall back on every map in Ella's collection in order to make their way home. The high mountain pass, as it turned out, still existed, though the road was littered with rocks in places, so that men had to go ahead of the carts and roll the stones and boulders out of the way.

Still, they made it home.

When they arrived back in Charmont after their perilous and arduous journey, and Henry rode triumphantly into the city, propped up on his horse by Ella sitting tall in the saddle behind him, while the people cheered and threw flowers in the road ahead of them, I wasn't there for that, either.

I was up in the sky, nestled against a backdrop of stars, my twinkle distinct from those celestial bodies. I had a great time of it, granting wishes to many a hope-filled child who wished

upon the first star of evening, little knowing the star they wished upon was me.

From that viewpoint far away, I watched the events unfolding on earth, and I smiled, celebrating with sparks of joy at Robert's triumphant return to Caprese, the ousting of Madame De Bouchard and her daughters, and the sale of the goods from his carts, to eager buyers, at ten times their usual price.

Ella tracked down the farmer whose pumpkin had become her coach. She paid him ten times the usual price of the gourd, and presented him as well with cinnamon, ginger, and cloves, enough to make many pumpkin pies.

She spent the next year cleansing Charmont of any hint that Madame Augusta had ever lived there—throwing wide the windows, airing out the rooms, and reclaiming the dresses her mother had made for her.

The horses, too, were glad to be home, and frolicked in the pastures when Ella was not working with them. With the birth of new foals the next spring, Robert announced their herd was growing too large for their pasture, and so promised Ella six of her favorite horses as a wedding gift, to go with her when she went to live at the castle.

Henry recovered from his injuries as I smiled down from the heavens. While he grew stronger, his father the King, buoyed by the successful breach of the trade embargo, visited their allies in the neighboring kingdoms, and rallied them to band together, vowing to eliminate the trade impediments finally and completely.

Together, Prince Henry and his father tracked down where Richard had been keeping the embezzled tax money, and refunded all overpayments to their grateful citizens. There were many times Richard and his son were publically booed, until they finally left the country in disgrace. They fled east, of course, only to discover that the enemy of their enemy no longer wanted to be their friend, and they relocated several times before finally settling down quietly in Nordheim, where they were never able to speak a word against the rulers of

Charmont, for even there, the people had felt the pinch of the trade embargo, and celebrated Henry for saving them from it.

The king and the prince went on campaign together, forcing the pirates back out of the lands they'd invaded, and freeing the kingdoms to the east from their oppression. They opened up trade routes, cleared even the waterways of pirate activity, improved roads, built bridges, cleared the mountain pass, and in all other ways, worked to protect the safety of travelers and merchants for many years to come.

With their kingdom secure, the rulers of Charmont enjoyed renewed support and popularity, to the point that not even Madame De Bouchard dared speak anything against the prince or his betrothed, but instead became one of their most outspoken fans, always playing up the fact that Ella had once served as a lady-in-waiting in her household (she tended to leave off the bit about her marriage to Robert, as that led to questions about why they were no longer together).

It was a full year before Henry finally returned to Charmont to rule alongside his father, and to plan his wedding to Ella, which was the event of the decade.

Ella wore her reunited glass slippers and a gown of the finest imported silks. Her ladies-in-waiting were Prince Henry's sisters, together with Cecile, Helene, and a few of the other handmaids who had served alongside Ella in Madame De Bouchard's household. She even invited Agatha and Bertha to serve as handmaids, as well, but by that time the sisters had followed their cousin Richard to Nordheim, and were engaged to be married to noblemen there, and did not return to Charmont for Ella's wedding.

After the ceremony the newlyweds hosted a ball that lasted three full days, and they danced enough to make up for all the dances they'd missed before. The wine flowed freely (though Jerome chose to abstain, having given it up following a frightful scare with double vision) and the food tables were never empty, though Sigismund kept the kitchen help busy replenishing the sausage platters.

I saw it all, beaming brightly from the sky—so brightly, in

fact, that I was spotted by many an eager star-gazer, and granted several more fabulous wishes. Delightful as it was to look down upon everyone, I missed my goddaughter terribly, and longed to return to my duties with her family.

It was little more than a year after that when I found myself again on earth, in Cinderella's bedchamber, as the first cries of her newborn daughter filled the air. The little girl was healthy and strong. She was named Eleanor, after her mother and grandmother and all the women who'd come before her. She grew to be a wise, kind, brave, and resilient young woman, who went on to do many great things and have grand adventures, and to eventually pass the glass slippers along to her own daughter.

But here I go, getting ahead of myself again!

There's only one thing left you need to know.

We all lived happily ever after.

THE END

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Cinders: The Untold Story of Cinderella*. This story meant a great deal to me, because I have always loved the Cinderella fairy tale, but felt many versions put too great an emphasis on Cinderella's looks, while downplaying the importance of her tenacity, perseverance, integrity, and strength. My goal was to follow her character through the transition from girlhood to womanhood, and to highlight the struggles she faced, which are not altogether different from the struggles every other woman faces during those pivotal years.

Cinderella faced loss, heartache, and despair. She was forced to persevere and remain true to herself in a world that did not recognize her for who she was, and which threatened to deny her every mark of her humanity: her name, her voice, her family, and her home. Like so many women who have faced similar struggles, she was able to rise above every obstacle placed before her. My hope is that her story will encourage you, wherever you are in your journey.

If you enjoyed this book, you might also appreciate my Dragon Eye series, which features royal dragon warriors. That series begins with the book, *Dragon*.

Thank you for joining me.

Finley

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CINDERS

Everything you've been told is wrong.

Oh, not everything, I suppose. Yes, I turned a pumpkin into a coach and mice into horses. The stroke of midnight, the glass slippers, and the prince searching for a girl whose foot fit the shoe…those were all part of the story.

And yet, the prince didn't just fall in love with Cinderella because she looked good at the ball. Pigeon feathers and pollywogs! Could you respect him if he did?

I most certainly could not.

No, no, there was vastly more that happened before the night of the ball, and a great deal of international intrigue after. Cinderella was a warrior who saved the life of the prince and defended her kingdom from oppressors who were plotting to overthrow the king.

They didn't tell you that part?

It's time, past time, for you to know the true story of the real Cinderella.

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